

And They Were Roommates (Oh My God They Were Roommates)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/38230375) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/38230375>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	M/M , Gen
Fandoms:	Rapunzel's Tangled Adventure (Cartoon) , Varian and the Seven Kingdoms , Ever After High
Relationships:	Hugo/Varian (Disney: Varian and the Seven Kingdoms) , Hugo & Varian (Disney: Varian and the Seven Kingdoms) , Eugene Fitzherbert Flynn Rider/Rapunzel , Hugo & Nuru & Varian & Yong (Disney: Varian and the Seven Kingdoms)
Characters:	Hugo (Disney: Varian and the Seven Kingdoms) , Varian (Disney) , Ruddiger (Disney) , Olivia (Disney: Varian and the Seven Kingdoms) , Donella (Disney: Varian and the Seven Kingdoms) , Rapunzel (Disney) , Eugene Fitzherbert Flynn Rider , Lance Strongbow , Cassandra (Disney: Tangled) , Nuru (Disney: Varian and the Seven Kingdoms) , Yong (Disney: Varian and the Seven Kingdoms)
Additional Tags:	and they were ROOMMATES , oh my god they were roommates , Roommates , Rivals to Friends to Lovers , Rivals , alchemy boyfriends - Freeform , POV Alternating , Swearing , Tags May Change , Crack Treated Seriously , Fluff , Angst , Hurt/Comfort , Friendship , Mutual Pining , eventually , Oblivious Varian (Disney) , Inspired by Varian and the Seven Kingdoms - Kaitlyn Ritter & Anna Lencioni
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2022-04-07 Updated: 2025-07-31 Words: 228,211 Chapters: 28/?

And They Were Roommates (Oh My God They Were Roommates)

by [DreadPirateUrania13](#)

Summary

Varian Gale, son of Dorothy, attends Ever After High to prepare for his destiny as the next Dorothy. Hugo Cast, son of the Sorcerer, attends Ever After High to prepare for his destiny as the next Sorcerer's Apprentice.

As the conflict between the Royals, those who believe everyone should follow their destinies, and the Rebels, who wish to forge their own path in life, continues to escalate, Varian and Hugo find that their biggest challenge will not be their studies, nor the immense pressure to live up to expectations set before them. No, their real test will be whether or not they can survive rooming together all year... the jury is still out on that.

Notes

Hi y'all! I love Vat7K and I've always been fascinated by Ever After High, so I thought it would be fun to combine the two and see the Alchemy Boyfriends in this cool world! Hope y'all enjoy!

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Prologue (extended summary)

This is the story of Ever After High. A school created for the next generation of fairytale characters. Where everyone must honor their legacy and uphold their story by following in their parent's footsteps... or not.

For you see, many students have begun to question their destinies, instead finding that their hearts are leading them down a different path than their predecessors.

So we find a school divided between the Royals and the Rebels.

But even so, life attempts to keep moving forward, despite the tension. For most students, their focus remains on their studies... and other things.

So, Varian Gale, son of Dorothy, has a roommate. Even though he *specifically asked* not to have one. But Varian is a man of science, despite what ~~Dad~~ some may protest; and science is all about adapting and learning, so that's what Varian planned to do. At least, what he planned to do *until* he saw who his roommate was: Hugo Cast.

Hugo is the WORST. From the moment Varian met Hugo, he had been nothing but a condescending, insincere asshole. Always wearing a stupid smug look on his face, like everything came oh so easy to him.

Not that he is *incorrect* in thinking that. Not only is he a wiz (pun intended) at magic, AND SCIENCE (that's not the least bit fair), but he is also very well liked. And yeah, Varian can deduce why that is. Hugo is attractive, on an objective level. He is also smart, suave, and sorta stylish (if steam-punk-petty-thief is the look he's going for... which looks way too good on him).

BUT, he's also the WORST, as previously stated. Sneaky, uncaring, and personally sent from hell to torment Varian.

Needless to say, it is going to be a long year.

So, Hugo Cast, son of the Sorcerer, has a roommate. *Great*. Nice to see that all his mother's ~~bitching~~ urging to Headmaster Grimm to let him room alone was for nothing. Still, Hugo initially mused, as long as his roommate steered clear of him, they'd be all set. But then Hugo found out exactly who his roommate was: Varian Gale.

Varian is... something. Smart, short, and oh so easy to get a rise out of. Hugo quickly forgot how shitty it was living with someone once he realized how fun it would be rooming with Varian. Well, fun for him. Varian was, and still is, less than pleased, obviously. Anytime Hugo pushes his buttons, like when he "borrowed" his good pens or pointed out the mistakes in his homework, Varian gets this incredible scrunched up look on his face, which is all red from fury. It is really something.

But, it isn't all bliss. Varian and Hugo have a lot of the same classes, and Hugo noticed pretty early on that Varian is just the slightest bit, just a tad, just a teeny tiny smidge better at science than he was. Not that it mattered to Hugo. His destiny is all about sorcery, not science (even if it was way more interesting) so why would he care? It's just... Varian gets this stupid satisfied look every time he does something better than Hugo, better than everyone in fact. Hugo always notices it, even when he doesn't want to. It's getting distracting.

Hugo is starting to think that messing with Varian is going to get old much faster than he hoped.

Welcome Home Roomie! :D

Chapter Summary

Parental pressures, awkward first encounters, and other such shenanigans...

Chapter Notes

Hello there! Thank you for waiting! Now that it's summer I plan on updating more frequently. Enjoy the new chapter! Hope y'all have a lovely day!!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The problems began on move-in day.

“Dad, I told you I’m fine!”

“I’m just saying, Son, maybe this is not the best idea. You can commute to school and still manage.”

Varian pulled the last of his bags from out the back of the carriage with a huff.

“I’m taking an extra class Dad! I need to be here, especially for the classes with labs!”

Quirin, Varian’s father, sighed. “That’s another thing, Son...”

Varian rolled his eyes in anticipation and annoyance. *Not this again.*

“It may not be so good for you to be taking those classes. They’re certainly not ‘destiny’ oriented enough.”

Varian crossed his arms, trying to look sure. “Most of those are school requirements, not destiny ones.”

“Chemythsty is a requirement?” Dad handed him his carry-on bag.

“Yes.”

No. Chemythstry was not a requirement. Nor was Science and Sorcery, or even Magicology. Varian was the next Dorothy, which Quirin never let him forget, and Dorothy was no scientist, magician, and most certainly was no alchemist. But *Varian* was. At least, he wanted to be; so desperately and intensely he wanted to be.

Ulla had wanted to be an alchemist too. And look how that ended.

Neither of them said this out loud, but it always crossed their minds when the Varian's interest in his mother's true passion was brought up.

Varian could tell Quirin was thinking of it now.

Quirin looked his son in the eyes. Varian tried not to look down at his feet. After a minute, Quirin sighed.

"If you ever need to come home, or are in over your head, please call me."

Varian began to smile, and opened his mouth to respond, but Quirin interrupted. "But don't get into trouble in the first place. There's been far too much of that. Understood?"

The young man wilted. "Yes, sir."

Quirin smiled, in a strained way. "I'll see you on Legacy Day."

Varian flinched despite himself at the mention of that day. He could almost feel the pressure on him physically increase. When that day finally came, Varian would have to say goodbye to all he wanted to be, even more than he already did.

Then, with a nod and one last well wishes, Varian was left alone at the front steps of Ever After High. When the carriage had disappeared from view, Varian looked up at the towering, castle-like school. In the afternoon sun, its countless windows shone like diamonds, surrounded by soft cream colored stone and emerald green foliage. Fall had yet to truly set in, so some of the vines even carried summer blossoms. Back on the ground, students from far and wide wandered into the tall open front entrance of the school. Some came with even more luggage than him, the more fancy looking ones even had crews to bring it all to their room. A couple students even seemed to be levitating their bags with magic.

Looking down at his own bags, few but heavy, the exhaustion of the day hit Varian all at once. All he wanted now was to get to his room, which he'd luckily gotten assigned all to himself, and collapse.

A rustling beside him pulled Varian from his drowsy thoughts. From out of his carry-on bag, which seemed almost comically too large and heavy to be carried around, particularly by someone as scrawny looking as Varian, a raccoon popped out.

Varian scratched behind his pet's ear. "Hope it wasn't too cramped in there buddy."

Ruddiger jumped out and onto the ground, looking less than pleased.

"Hey, don't look at me like that." Varian laughed. "I know what will cheer you up?"

Varian dramatically retrieved an apple from one of his other bags. The raccoon lit up. Varian went to hand him the snack, when it suddenly disappeared from his hand.

To his left, a small, golden, strangely shiny mouse jumped with joy as it held the previously mentioned apple. Ruddiger was less joyful. As the raccoon swiped at the mouse. It jumped out of the way and began running circles around Varian.

“Ruddiger, calm down! It's just an apple! I have more-”

Suddenly, the mouse dove into Varian's still open bag and emerged with a pair of goggles, worn with age beyond Varian's years. His eyes went wide with panic. The young man tried to grab the item, but the rodent then jumped back down to the ground and broke into a sprint away from the larger animal, bolting into the school. Varian's furry companion ran right after it.

“Ruddiger!” Varian ran after him, which was difficult with all his luggage. He managed to stay just within eyesight of the two animals, following them deep into the school. All the way to the dormitories.

Legacy Day. A remarkable annual event where the students of Ever After High pledge to follow their destiny, and magically bind themselves to their stories forever by signing their name in the Storybook of Legends.

For the Royals, those with Happily-Ever-After, such as Apple White, daughter of Snow White, this day was a joyous event. But for some, this day was a death sentence. A final goodbye to the life they *wanted* in exchange for the life they were saddled with at birth.

But, unknown yet to Varian Gale and countless other students, something was beginning. For some students, like the infamous daughter of the Evil Queen, Raven Queen, were beginning to ask: did they really *have to* sign the Storybook?

But, as previously mentioned, not every student was dreading this crucial day.

Hugo moved into Ever After High alone.

The routine was the same as the previous years, both at Ever After High and his previous boarding schools. Show up, find room, unpack (shove everything wherever it fits), prep for classes (relax while you still can).

Hugo already knew what room he was in, Donella had told him, so he paid no mind to the roommate assignment sheet on the door. After all, he was rooming alone this year, so he already knew what it said. Don had made sure of all that. It was her idea anyhow, something about needing to ‘focus’. She never did see people as anything more than potential distractions, and this year that was more apparent than ever.

So yeah, he had a pretty clear routine.

This routine did not include his mother.

To her credit, Don had left him a letter this time. He found it when he opened his main luggage bag. It sat plainly on top of his things, held shut by a small wax seal with a broom surrounded by stars as its symbol. The symbol of the Sorcerer. Hugo broke the seal carefully and read the letter. Its brevity made him laugh.

Hugo,

Don't do anything stupid before Legacy Day .

Donella

Ah yes, Legacy Day.

Fucking FINALLY.

His ticket to the good life was finally within reach. No more stress. No more administrators (Headmaster Grimm) unfairly looking down on him, knowing he's adopted. No more of Donella's constant talk of proving himself. No more worrying about the stability of his future. No more self doubt (not that he had any). Just smooth sailing into a real, destined, Happily-Ever-After. And he didn't even have to be stuck-up Royalty to get it! First a real apprenticeship, then, after a few expected mess ups (as was destined of the Sorcerer's Apprentice), he would become the actual SORCERER! Just like his mother before him.

Fragily, he refolded the letter, setting it onto his dorm desk.

It didn't take long for Hugo to unpack the rest of his things. The important stuff, i.e. school things, were packed into his desk with relative ease. The rest of his things were thrown into his closet and under his bed with little regard for organization or tact. Hugo collapsed onto his new bed and sighed. With luck, he would meet all of Donella's expectations by the time Legacy Day rolled around. He knew he could, obviously, so why bother worrying about it.

Not that he was worried.

Quietly the door of his dorm creaked open.

In scurried Olivia, Hugo's robotic pet mouse. She quickly climbed up and onto his bed, dropping an apple in front of him. Her leg was semi-stuck to a pair of goggles.

"There you are, Liv," Hugo sighed, removing the headgear from under her. "Was wondering where you wandered off to. Haven't been getting into trouble have you?" He picked up the goggles.

Then, the door opened more widely, as a raccoon ran into the room.

Olivia shrieked, taking the apple back into her mouth and booking it off the bed and away from the raccoon. The two animals ran in frantic circles on the floor.

"What the hell?!" Hugo jumped off his bed to try and intervene (or cheer Olivia on, he hadn't decided yet), right as the door opened completely and loudly slammed into the wall, as an out-of-breath young man burst into the room.

"Ruddiger!"

The raccoon ceased his movement, looking back at the young man with what seemed to be an apologetic look. It was hard to tell, since this was a raccoon.

Hugo turned his attention to the young man. He was short and scrawny, with unruly, fluffy dark hair that contained a small but bright streak of blue through it. On his face, mainly across his nose and cheeks, were a myriad of freckles. The young man turned to him, and Hugo saw that his blue eyes matched his hairstripe.

"Hey! Is this your mouse?" He still sounded out-of-breath.

As he spoke, Hugo noticed he had a slight overbite. "Who's asking?"

Olivia proceeded to climb onto the blond's shoulder

Traitor. Hugo thought with no real bite.

"Who's asking? The guy who's stuff the mouse was shifting through, that's who!"

Hugo crossed his arms. "She took an apple, I doubt that qualifies as a high offense, Sweetcheeks."

"And my goggles!"

Hugo twirled said goggles around his finger. "Right. Cause these are worth their weight in gold."

The young man's frown turned more sour. "Yeah, they are," he collected himself. "She also spooked my buddy. I just ran up a flight of stairs carrying all this!" The young man dropped his bags. "I think I'm owed an apology."

"An apology? Listen Sweet-"

"My name is Varian!"

Hugo chuckled. "Okay listen Varian, why don't find a little complaint box to pester instead, and get out of my room and back to your own."

"Well excuse me, Mr. High and Mighty! I'm still looking for my room!"

The blond's face turned into a frown. "It's Hugo! And well, go look for it then! I'm sure your roommate is just *itching* to make friends with a brat like you!"

Varian huffed something that sounded like an expletive, but one Hugo hadn't heard before. In the same breath, he walked up to Hugo, snatched his goggles out of the blond's hand, and stormed out of the room, dragging his bags out with him.

What a piece of work. Hugo thought. *I don't envy the guy who has to deal with his uppity self.* Hugo reacquainted himself with his bed, trying to get comfortable again. *Although, it would be kinda funny to mess with him. He's got quite the angry face.* Hugo mused, relaxing once again. Only when he finally closed his eyes did the door slam open again. He shot up in his bed, and in walked a very pissed off Varian.

Before Hugo could say a word, Varian ripped the roommate assignment sheet from the front door, which only *now* did the blond remember was there at all, and held it up for Hugo to see. In the school's signature cursive calligraphy it read:

"Hugo Cast"

"Varian Gale"

For a moment, the only movement in the room was Olivia, as she toyed with the apple she'd stolen. Then, the now calmer raccoon hopped through the doorway, running right over to the opposite side of the room, before finally settling down on the unoccupied bed. The creature looked quite at-home already.

“Ruddiger!” Varian hissed. His face scrunched around his nose and his cheeks, truly covered in freckles, turned a furious shade.

Hugo smiled so wide he thought he’d hurt himself. Then, collecting his mirthful mood, Hugo leaned back against his headboard.

“Welcome home, roomie!”

Chapter End Notes

Don't you hate it when your new roommate (who you weren't supposed to have) is an asshole with a little demon pet? Am I talking about Hugo or Varian? That's for you to decide! :D

Kudos and Comments are always welcome! Now go drink some water.

Phone a Friend

Chapter Summary

Our favorite duo does their little dance then meets with some Side Characters! *jazz hands*

Chapter Notes

A new chapter? In the same week as the last? It's more likely than you think. Hope y'all have a lovely day!!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“So we can’t have singles?” Varian and Hugo asked at the same time.

Headmaster Grimm rubbed his temple. Both Varian and Hugo were already acquainted with Grimm, who had headed Ever After High for decades. Neither had good things to say about the man, even before this fiasco.

“As I said, twice,” the Headmaster said, “With so many of the Wonderland students here this year, there is very limited space in the dormitories. The single rooms are being reserved for high priority situations.”

“You mean Royalty,” Hugo interjected, less upset than Varian but certainly peeved at Grimm’s decisions. In particular, Varian noticed that he said that word ‘Royalty’ with an almost purposeful disdain. It made Varian wonder what his destiny might be. He tucked the thought away for later.

“Yeah!” Varian agreed with the taller student. “I know for a fact that Wilbur Denmark got his own room! I’m sure that had *nothing* to do with him being the next Hamlet.” Varian made his sarcasm apparent.

Headmaster Grimm frowned. “The decisions made around housing are final. Now, unless either of you have a concern which can truly be dealt with, please vacate my office.”

Hugo didn’t have to be told twice, turning on his heel and leaving all in the same moment. Varian stalled for a moment, debating how much trouble he’d get in for kicking over a chair, before his Dad’s voice appeared in his mind, shutting down the idea. Thus, he turned and followed his roommate out.

To Varian’s surprise, Hugo was waiting for him. “Guess we’re in this for the long haul,” the blond said as he adjusted his glasses with one hand.

The dark haired young man was about to respond, but something bright red and orange, in Hugo’s off hand, caught his eye. A phoenix feather, one that he recognized from Headmaster Grimm’s

office.

“When did you swipe that off his desk?”

Hugo smiled, twirled the phoenix feather pen between his fingers. “Somewhere between you calling him incompetent and him telling you to watch your tone, I think.”

Varian almost said something complimentary to his roommate, but settled on an eye roll. He didn’t want to give the blond an ego boost. He already looked smug. Way too smug.

Varian glared at him. “Could you stop that?”

Hugo looked surprised. “Stop what?”

“That thing with your face.”

Unfortunately, this solidified the smug grin.

“What thing?” Hugo said sing-songily.

Varian didn’t bother responding. With a huff he started walking down the hall. But, like a curse, Hugo followed him.

“It really wasn’t difficult to grab, what with all the talking,” Hugo laughed. “Besides, it’s easy to get away with things like this when you’re the brightest person in the room.”

Now *that* made Varian stop in his tracks. *Who does this guy think he is?* “I’m sorry, what is your destiny again? Petty thief?”

Hugo feigned surprise. “You mean you cannot recognize greatness in the making?” The blond dramatically held his hand over his heart. “I am the next Sorcerer’s Apprentice. Well, that and then later the next Sorcerer.”

Varian grit his teeth. *Of course an asshole like this gets such a cushy destiny.* Varian tried to calm his jealousy, to little avail.

“And how about you, freckles?” Hugo asked with that same smug grin, hands now behind his back.

“The next Dorothy,” Varian crossed his arms.

“The farmer?” Hugo asked. The dark haired young man nodded.

“Not a surprise.” The future Sorcerer said neutrally.

“And why’s that?” Varian already sounded insulted, expecting a rude reason.

Hugo looked him in the eyes (Varian tried not to notice how vividly green they were), getting in his personal space just a little too much for Varian’s liking. Neither of them said a word. Hugo just kept looking at him. Varian was very close to punching him in the gut. Then, Hugo flipped the bandana Varian wore around his neck up at his face.

“Just a hunch,” Hugo said in a low tone.

Varian stuttered for a moment, trying to say something witty, or maybe just mean, but before he could Hugo was gone.

Left alone, the freckled young man groaned in anger and frustration, before kicking the locker next to him. *At least he didn't mess with my goggles this time, but still...*

Varian sighed. "This is going to be a long year."

With nothing left to do, and being quite hungry after such a long day, Varian made his way to the Castleteria for dinner. Entering through the wide main doors, Varian let himself get reacquainted with the space. Like much of the outside of the school, the room's tall walls and high ceilings were lined with greenery, and even the trunks of trees built into the school's infrastructure. All of which was surrounded by white marble and royal red banner flags, themselves lined with gold. In contrast to the glamor of the room's decor, the seating arrangements were largely bland, beige long tables. This also contrasted with the students sitting at said tables, as all of them seemed to be trying to win an imaginary 'most fashionable/brightly colored' contest. A contest which Varian saw little interest in taking part in. His own clothes were bright, sure, but they clashed. That didn't bother him though.

"Varian!" A voice shouted, yanking the young man from his thoughts. Before Varian could react, he was pulled in a rib crushing hug. His vision became enveloped in blonde hair. Varian smiled wide.

"Hi Rapunzel!" He was finally released from the hug (just in time too; he needed to catch his breath), and his friend came into full view.

Rapunzel O'Hair Jr, daughter of, well, Rapunzel. It was very rare for children of fairytale characters to be named after those characters, since they would eventually inherit the name of their predecessor anyways. But, Rapunzel Sr. was apparently ahead of the game, deciding to simply give her daughter that name upfront. Cut out the middleman, so to speak.

Her long golden hair, normally seventy feet long, was held together at ankle length by what must be the world's strongest magical hairbands. She wore a light purple dress, and no shoes. The administrators had long tried to get her to wear shoes on school grounds, but there wasn't much they could do to sway Rapunzel.

"I missed you kiddo! How've you been? What've you been up to? How did your move-in day go? Have you eaten yet? Let's get you something to eat!" She began dragging him towards the food line.

Varian didn't bother resisting, laughing happily at her motherly-ness. "You haven't changed a bit since last year."

Once they had gotten their food and found a table to themselves, the conversation flowed. Recounting summers, family happenings, everything that the other didn't already know.

"Have you met up with your roommate yet?" Varian asked.

Rapunzel smiled wide. "Yeah! I got Cassandra again, who is currently in our room, already cramming for her first Hero Training exam later this week!"

“She finally got the class! About time!”

“She basically had to threaten Grimm with a sword to get it, but somehow she got it.” Rapunzel laughed. Varian laughed along with her. Suddenly, Rapunzel gasped. “Oh! Did you get into the science classes this year?”

“Yes!! After getting ahead on all my requirements with last year's extra courses,” Varian let his pride seep into his voice. “I had enough free blocks this year to get into three science classes!” He winced. “Although, one of them did have to be in another extra class this year. Dad made me use one of the free blocks to join Hero Training too.” *It'll be nice to have a friend in the class though.* Varian thought.

Rapunzel squealed. “That’s amazing! I knew you could do it!”

Varian smiled at his friend. Rapunzel had befriended him all the way back in middle school, back when he was even more of an introvert than he was now. She’d stuck by him, even through the years where he wasn’t exactly coping well with life. Varian knew he was lucky to have her as a friend, even though she would *always* say it was the other way around.

“Wait, I just realized, you haven’t mentioned *your* roommate yet! Have you met them?”

Varian dropped his head onto the table, letting out a string of groans. “Unfortunately.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Sister, you don’t know the half of it,” Varian said, before launching into an explanation/rant about Hugo.

When he finally paused to take a breath, Rapunzel ruffled his hair sympathetically.

“Hey, I’m sure you’ll get along eventually.”

Varian frowned. “You have too much faith in smug assholes.”

“Well, I am dating Eugene.”

Varian rolled his eyes. “Eugene was just vain, and he’s not even like that at all anymore! He’s capable of change, and empathy, and wasn’t sent from hell to torment me by living with me when all I wanted was a room *alone* !”

“Okay drama-chemist,” Rapunzel pouted. “Why don’t you try talking to him? Meet a middle ground!”

Varian gave her an unimpressed look.

“Or, you can just skip straight to killing each other, if that’s where you want it to go.” Ah yes, the other side of Rapunzel’s motherly-ness: the scolding.

Varian sighed, and then smiled. “Alright. I’ll *try*. ”

Rapunzel’s sunny demeanor returned in an instant. “Perfect! And who knows, this Hugo character may just surprise you!”

Varian doubted that.

Above them, the eight o'clock bell chimed, much to Varian's surprise. They really had been talking for a while!

Rapunzel stood. "I've gotta head back to my room. I still need to prep for Princessology tomorrow. Good luck at your classes tomorrow! You'll do great!" She gave him one last tight hug before she ran off.

Right, classes! He needed to prepare too. Varian took off running towards the library.

After the meeting with Grimm, and pissing off Varian for the hell of it, Hugo had decided to wander campus for a while. He made a mental note of all the hidden areas and climbable walls he could find along the way. Finally, he made his way back to his, still shared, dorm room. He found himself smiling the whole way back. All in all, he wasn't too broken up about not getting a single. Truthfully, he couldn't remember the last time someone was this fun to mess with. Freckles was so easy to rile up.

So, apparently he was a farm boy. Explained the freckles, Hugo supposed. Not that he really cared about that.

As Hugo reached his room and walked in, he noticed that Olivia was in her little charging station. He figured he should leave her there to rest. Over on Goggles' side of the room, still littered with unopened bags (Hugo smirked, thinking the shorter young man was hoping he would get to move out. Guess now they're officially stuck together), the raccoon was also asleep.

Hugo winced, reminded of the chaos the two animals (robotic or not) created upon arrival. Hopefully, for all of their sakes, that wouldn't be repeated in the near future. The pessimistic part of the blond knew that was a pipe dream.

Olivia didn't usually get worked up like that. She was calm around most animals and people. Even Mother never seemed to mind Olivia, thinking of her as a good way to keep Hugo crafty and a problem solver. Hugo remembered worrying, once upon a time, that Donella would make him get rid of her. But she never did, and he was grateful.

Wait.

Oh shit. Don. He needed to tell Don about the whole "roommates" situation.

Welp. Hugo thought. *Might as well rip off the bandaid.* He picked up his Mirrorphone and texted the first person in his recent messages.

Hey Don. Little update: I have a roommate. Already talked to Grimm. No luck.

Hugo set the device down and went to his desk, planning to get some prep time in before classes started tomorrow. But, before he could even pull the desk drawer out, his Mirrorphone began to buzz. It was an older model, one he'd had for years, but more secure thanks to all the modifications

he'd given it. Magical and otherwise. Even the ringtone was unique. He picked it back up and took a breath, readying his best ' *everything is fine* ' tone.

"Don! Heya! How's it going?"

"What did you do?"

Hugo feigned shock, masking nervousness. "The fact that you would even insinuate—"

"Tell me." Don said with no room for joking.

Hugo gulped. "I didn't do anything. Grimm is just an ass and singles are in short supply. It won't affect my grades I promise."

He heard Don click her tongue.

"This is not good, Hugo, regardless of academics. It's a liability for you to be rooming with someone. There may be times where I need you to do something for me, and I can't have some nosy roommate of yours getting suspicious, or worse, getting all buddy buddy and asking where you are. If this roommate of yours interferes with anything—"

"He won't!" Hugo panicked before calming back down. "Trust me, this guy doesn't want anything to do with me."

Don hummed. "Let's keep it that way, shall we?"

"Of course."

"What's his name?"

"Varian Gale." Hugo thought he heard a small gasp on the other end of the line.

"Gale..." Don said, thoughtfully.

A long pause followed, before her voice emerged, sending uncomfortable needles down Hugo's spine. "My expectations for you are the same as always. Don't think you're out of the woods yet. Until you sign your name in that dusty old storybook, I'll accept nothing but the best from you. Do not disappoint me."

The call ended with a harsh click on the other end. Hugo set down his Mirrorphone gently, allowing himself a sigh in relief. The call could've gone *much* worse. This wasn't the scariest he had heard Don be. Not even close.

For Donella, the Sorcerer, was more than just that. Unknown to the fairytale world, she was a criminal.

When Hugo was adopted, he got roped into her schemes almost immediately, even as a child. He liked feeling included, feeling useful, but a threat always loomed over him when he got involved. The threat of being cast back out. The threat of being thrown away for not doing his best. For failing.

Well, after Legacy Day, that threat would be null and void. No casting him out when destiny was involved. Destiny was not a lackey Donella could curb. Lackeys were a diamond dozen; destiny

was protection. Donella was protected by destiny. She had everything Hugo wanted.

Just have to make it to Legacy Day. He thought, expecting the phrase to become a mantra.

Olivia crawled up Hugo's arm and sat on his shoulder. He smiled at her, giving her a little pet behind the ears. "Hey, Liv. Have a good nap?"

She squealed in confirmation.

Hugo heard the eight o'clock bell chime. He figured it was time he got a snack for Olivia (even though she couldn't eat it, she loved to play with fruits and such, so he made a point to get them for her), and got himself something to eat too.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry to all the Holly O'Hair/Poppy O'Hair fans but I didn't have the heart to take Rapunzel OUT OF THE RAPUNZEL STORY! It's literally her!!

Anyhow, kudos and comments are always welcome! Hope y'all have a lovely day!!!

Ground Rules

Chapter Summary

Conversations are had and issues are brought up. Are they dealt with? Uh... Anyways, here's Wonderwall

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

By the time Varian returned to his room, after a stop at the library, it was dark outside.

The outdoor lanterns were lit and shining through the hallway window, casting long shadows on the dorm doors. It had surprised Varian. He had spent much longer than he planned to in the library. But he couldn't help it! The EAH Library contained such an extensive selection of knowledge, more than Varian could read through in a lifetime. That made him want to meet the challenge and try.

The setting was also a joy to simply be in. Easily, the location had the highest ceiling in the school. The six stories high shelves were full of books both new and old, packed tight between intermittent tree trunks built into the shelves and outer walls, similar to the Castleteria. In contrast to the Castleteria, though, the library walls were gray; a design choice that would have made the space depressing if not for the massive, ceiling to floor glass wall, which allowed for the afternoon sunlight to stream into the entire library. Without a doubt, it was Varian's favorite place to study, or hide, depending on the day.

While there, he had made a bee-line for every alchemical, science, and/or magic related reading the library had. Only after he found the ones that interested him did he go looking for some class textbooks, including one for Hero Training, which he remembered thanks to his conversation with Rapunzel. It was certainly 'destiny' appropriate (Wicked Witches aren't going to melt themselves, after all), but not required; and definitely not something the alchemist would normally choose to take. As Varian had said to his friend, Dad wanted him to take that class. Dad thought being able to defend one's self was very important, given his history as a knight. It wasn't Varian's destiny to be a knight, but it wasn't his Dad's destiny either. Quirin was one of the lucky many who had no destiny. It was easy to forget in the walls of Ever After High, but most people in the kingdom of Ever After, Oz, Wonderland, and beyond had no destiny at all.

But Varian was 'lucky', as Dad always said.

Yeah. Lucky me. He thought bitterly. He turned the corner and found himself already at his door, too lost in his thoughts to realize how quickly he's traveled.

When Varian entered the room, he saw from behind his wall of paper and hardcovers that Hugo was already there, back from who knows where he'd run off to. Currently, the blond was scanning through a textbook and absentmindedly chewing on an apple. His hair was down from its earlier ponytail, hanging over his undercut. It looked freshly washed.

When he looked up at Varian and noticed the high stack of books he was carrying, his green eyes suddenly went wide behind his glasses.

“What kind of classes are you *taking* ?” Hugo asked, both surprised by the amount and by his roommate’s ability to lift all of them.

Varian snickered pridefully, already annoyed. “These aren’t *all* for school. Just some light reading on the side,” he said, setting them down on his desk with a loud thud.

Hugo smirked, turning back to his book. “Whatever you say, freckles.”

Varian wiped his head around. “Stop calling me these nicknames. I-” He stopped himself. Rapunzel’s voice entered his mind, like a calm mediator in a war negotiation. The young man took a deep breath.

“Look, if we’re really going to be living together for the year, we’re gonna need some ground rules.”

Hugo raised an eyebrow, but hummed in agreement, not yet looking at his roommate.

“First off,” Varian continued. “Stop with the nicknames.”

Hugo smirked, turning a page. “I can make no promises, freckles.”

Middle ground. Middle ground. Middle ground. The farm boy internally repeated.

“Okay, then second off, let’s keep *out* of each other’s lives.”

In response to his words, and to Varian’s surprise, Hugo’s expression turned serious. He bookmarked the textbook he’d been skimming and looked up at him. “I agree completely. You don’t mess with my business, I don’t mess with yours. Our personal lives are ours alone. That’s the only ground rule needed on my end anyways.”

Varian let out a surprised sigh. “Good,” he processed the agreement. “Good,” he shook himself from his stupor. “Most importantly for me, though,” he stressed. “*Do not* touch my equipment.”

“Your equipment?”

Varian’s eyes lit up. He walked over to his side of the room, then dramatically opened the largest bag from his luggage.

“My equipment,” Varian said with a showman’s smile. Inside said bag was every possible tool or beaker needed for alchemical, scientific, or otherwise magical experimentation. Following this, he was expecting a reaction out of Hugo. Maybe some questions, or if he was lucky, some sort of awestruck look. What he did not expect was laughter. Well, a part of him always expected that, but for some reason it caught him off guard this time.

“Trust me, Goggles,” Hugo wiped a fake tear from his eye. “I won’t be needing *your* equipment.” Hugo swung his legs off his bed and knelt down, pulling out a large tupperware from under it that contained similarly complex equipment.

Hugo looked at Varian with that smug expression that Varian now realized was on his face far too often for his liking. It showed from his Cheshire cat grin to his sparkling green eyes, reflecting in

his glasses.

Varian looked at Hugo with a look of sheer surprise, but only for a moment. Then it settled into something more, determined. Unwavering. Almost joyful, despite itself, apparent in his furrowed brows and bright blue eyes. It seemed to compel Hugo. But towards what, he couldn't say.

Something seemed to subtly *click* in both roommates' minds. A growing feeling that neither of them had felt in a long time, if ever. It felt so new to them that neither could put a name to it at first.

As soon as it appeared it was gone again.

"I guess that explains those goggles of yours, Goggles." Hugo walked closer to his roommate, examining him.

"It's basic safety," Varian said, crossing his arms and avoiding eye contact.

"But you wore them all day," Hugo tapped his finger to the goggles on the shorter student's head.

At this, Varian recoiled, putting his hand on them. "Like I said, it's for safety. Nothing more." He walked over to his desk, taking the gear off his head and beginning to set it down. But before he did, he stared at them as if they were an old friend. Not with a smile, but with a clear fondness.

Something in Hugo, a part of him that went all too ignored all too often, told him to stop pushing. The blond remembered he'd had a similar reaction when asked about his destiny. Clearly, these were sore subjects. But then, he heard Donella's voice— He remembered their call.

"Trust me, this guy doesn't want anything to do with me." He had said.

"Let's keep it that way, shall we?" She had commanded.

Without a second thought, Hugo picked up Varian's goggles.

"Well, what would you know about lab safety anyhow?"

Varian rushed towards Hugo, quickly trying to grab them back.

"Hey!" Varian said firmly.

Hugo ignored his words, holding the goggles out of reach and backing up. "Relax Sweetcheeks, I know how to handle 'safety' gear. I even have a pair myself. But, unlike you, I don't keep them around like a toddler does a blanket."

"Give them back."

"I just want to see them," Hugo said cheekily, spinning them on his finger, as he leaned on the wall by the window.

"Give them back!" Varian raised his voice.

The blond stopped himself from making eye contact with Varian. “You don’t even need them. It’s not exactly your destiny, farm boy.”

Hugo could practically *hear* a nerve being hit. He also heard his roommate choke on air.

“I said give them back!” Varian shoved Hugo with all his strength. The taller student was knocked off balance and fell towards the open window; sending the goggles flying out.

“No!” Varian ran to the windowsill, looking down frantically.

“Shit,” Hugo grimaced, picking himself up from where he fell. It was then that Varian turned back to look at him. He looked angry, and not the fun angry, like earlier. He looked unreasonably furious.

“What is your problem?!” Varian yelled. “I’m really sorry you have to room with me, I really am, but—I thought, Oz All Mighty, I thought you were just an asshole, but you’re really a fucking jerk! Fuck! If they broke I swear—”

“You shoved me!” Hugo shot back. “I didn’t mean to—”

But Varian was already out the door, off to find his goggles outside.

Hugo decided to leave Varian to his own devices from there. No point in running after that dramatic roommate of his. Not that Hugo would have in any scenario. It was Goggles’ own fault that the goggles went flying. Why had he reacted like that? Sure, the blond had wanted some annoyance out of him, to press a button or two that would cement the distance, but still that was quite intense.

A minute later, his phone rang. A familiar wave of anticipation hit him when he saw the contact’s name.

“Hey Cyrus, how are things where you’re stuck?” Hugo teased, trying to sound natural.

“She has a job for you.”

The tall student groaned. “Already? It’s late! I have classes tomorrow!”

“If you’re efficient, it’ll be an ‘in and out’ assignment.”

Hugo tapped his foot, thinking. Although, there wasn’t much to think about. Not like he had a choice in the matter. “Fine,” he walked over to his closet, taking out his hooded coat and face mask, putting it in quickly. “Hext me the details.”

The call ended with a soft click. Before he left, the blond stuffed his bed to look like a person was asleep under the covers and told Olivia to set his alarm for the morning.

After that, he shut off all the lights and went ahead with heading out. If he was lucky, his new roommate wouldn’t come back in a huff and try to wake him up to ‘talk’ or kick his ass. Varian already looked tired when he’d returned earlier, so his chances were good that that wouldn’t happen.

If Hugo was lucky, he wouldn't get caught by the farm boy now or ever. And, if his memories served correctly, Hugo was luckier than most.

As he ran, ignoring his cramping lungs as he did, Varian let himself rattle off as many curse words as he could think of, letting them echo into dark empty hallways of his vast boarding school. If something happened to his gear— if it was damaged beyond repair, he was really going to disappoint Dad, cause there was no way he'd be allowed to stay in school after the shit he'd do to that jerk living in *his* dorm space.

The googles took a little while to locate in the dark, but luckily they hadn't gone too far horizontally. The relief the dark haired student felt upon finding them, still in one piece, lying on soft grass, was immeasurable. With them in hand, he ran to the closest lamp, which shone down in a golden halo effect onto the ground. In its light, he carefully examined the headgear, checking for any scratches or breaks. Mercifully, they were mostly unscathed, just ruffled and dirty.

But still, even after the panic subdued, the fury Varian felt remained.

Varian looked up at the dorm windows. Some were lit and some were already dark. It certainly was late. He could see what he figured logically was his own room's window. For a flicker of a moment, the light was on. Then, someone, presumably Hugo, dimmed it.

One step forward, two steps back. Varian thought, knowing Rapunzel would be disappointed. He wasn't, though. Not in the slightest. Not even a little.

Fine. Let him be that way. We won't be friends. It's not even worth thinking about.

Varian really needed someone to talk to, and he really really did want to talk to Dad, so... He looked around, seeing that he was alone out here, and let himself take a deep breath. He stared down at his goggles, holding the worn leather straps tight.

"Hey Mom," Varian said to the darkness. "Sorry, your goggles almost got, well, wrecked," he breathed out a small laugh. "I'm still being careful with them, I promise."

He was met with vast silence.

"First day of school tomorrow. Wish me luck, Mom."

When he came back inside, and returned to his room, the lights were off (as he saw from outside), and Hugo seemed to be asleep. Despite Varian's fury persisting, his own exhaustion kept him from saying anything yet. Instead, he simply got into his pajamas, set his alarm, and went straight to bed,

Ruddiger stirred, shifting closer to his human friend.

Varian smiled, hoping that tomorrow would be better. If he was right, then it would be.

Me @ Varian and Hugo: “You have mother issues! :D”

Kudos and comments are always welcome!

FIRST DAY Part 1: What Is This Feeling

Chapter Summary

The first day begins.

Chapter Notes

Yes, this title is a Wicked reference. Yes, it is my favorite Wicked song. No, I do not accept constructive criticism. Enjoy the new chapter! Hope y'all have a lovely day!!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The first day of school. A single day where so much can occur. Old friends found, new friends gained, and a better sense of how the year will go is seen. But, most importantly to some, the first day contains the viewing of the competition. For the true overachievers, this day answers the age old question: Who is on my level?

From sunrise to sunset, the first day can set so much in motion for a student body.

The first day of classes at Ever After High is no exception.

Upon waking up, Varian knew he definitely had the worst bed head of his life. He didn't even have to see it, he could just *feel* it. Most likely, this was due to his own tossing and turning. Typical behavior of his when he slept away from home. Not that he was always allowed to do that. Besides for school (and even that was a yearly argument), the young man was not often allowed to take trips or leave home. After all, Varian was the next Dorothy, and Dorothy did not make a habit of leaving home, even before her story ends and she stays for good.

But Varian wasn't Dorothy. Not yet.

Still, he knew it would probably be about a week before that unconscious habit of his died down for good, which he had learned from previous school years. Usually, it would make him groggy in the mornings. However, today he felt ready to rise and shine. Varian rubbed his eyes and smiled to himself. The morning light was only just starting to stream in through the window, leaving the room awash with an orange-ish golden glow. This was to be expected, as the sun was still rising.

Today was the first day of classes, and Varian wanted an early morning to prepare.

With a satisfying stretch, the dark haired young man pulled himself out from his comfy sheets. Ruddiger was still asleep at the end of the bed, curled up adorably. His human buddy thought it best to leave him to rest.

Making his way over to the mirror, one look confirmed Varian's suspicions about his own hair. He turned to his closet and dug through it, looking for a hairbrush and a change of clothes. He opted for the garments that happened to be closest to him: his orange bandana, loose plaid gray shirt, some brown cargo pants with multiple pockets, and some outdoorsy boots. The fashion choices definitely screamed 'I grew up on a farm', but the school did have a strict 'destiny-centric' dress code, and he did not want to get into trouble right at the start of school... if he could help it. In all honesty, he doubted they would care, but with the course schedule he had now, and how off-script it was, he couldn't didn't want to take any chances. Dad would be so disappointed if he got in trouble before Legacy Day.

Varian did include his goggles in his outfit, letting them hang around his neck for the moment. Dress-code or not, that was one item that he would *not* exclude from his outfit. Naysayers be damned.

Suddenly, Varian frowned, remembering the previous night, unconsciously fiddling with the lenses of his goggles, as he did. But his thoughts were cut short when his roommate's own alarm began blaring.

Guess he wanted to get up early too. Varian mentally noted, proceeding to speed up getting packed for the day, so that he wouldn't have to deal with the asshole himself right now.

Looking at the alarm, Varian saw that it was actually Olivia, Hugo's (robotic, he had realized) mouse, sitting on his desk with her mouth open, blasting some heavy metal song that Varian vaguely recognized. Of all the alarms the blond could have chosen, this wasn't the *most* annoying (unlike the rest of Hugo, which was *definitely* the most annoying). At least it wasn't Tailor Quick, or something irritatingly catchy. Still, it was a bit much. Luckily, he was more used to the uncontrollable screech of a rooster in the morning, so in comparison this noise was nothing.

The noise did not seem to bother Hugo either. The blond was still in bed, looking even more exhausted, if less ruffled, than Varian. How he managed to still be good looking while dead asleep baffled Varian to a bitter degree. Some people were just born lucky, he guessed. Then, Hugo seemed to slightly awaken for a moment, before mumbling something to the mouse, dimming the noise. After that, he collapsed back into sleep.

This would have been sorta endearing, had it been anyone else.

Obviously, Varian was still upset with him. Hugo was out of line last night. He should not have messed with someone else's things, even if he didn't know their actual significance.

In hindsight, he could tell that the blond hadn't meant for the goggles to go out the window. It was an accident, plain and simple. But still, Hugo was no less a jerk in Varian's eyes.

Before leaving, Varian found some sticky notes in his desk drawer and wrote one out. Before opening the door to go, he stuck the note on the inside, where Hugo would see it.

Then, after shifting his goggles to rest on his head, and running back to leave a bowl full of pet food on the floor by Ruddiger, Varian left the room.

The further away from the dorms he walked, the more he gained a skip in his step.

Varian gleefully reviewed the class schedule he'd shoved into his pocket, smiling at what his first course of the day would be.

Despite planning to get up early, Hugo left his alarm blaring for a few too many pages. Turns out asking for “ten more minutes” does not stop the noise permanently. Go figure.

His assignment from Don (via Cyrus, her monotone left hand man) had indeed been quick, but the young man had already been tired, so the extra energy spent getting it done had drained him completely. But hey, at least it was over with. He’d found the item they wanted him to find, stolen it, and left it in the spot they planned to pick it up from. The blond wasn’t entirely sure why this item in particular was so important to them, it looked like an ordinary old vase, but it sure was hidden. A student wouldn’t normally have been able to find it, let alone know it was there. But the Sorcerer? She had better resources, and more ears to hear about things kept in the school’s walls. That was the fascinating thing about Ever After High— You’d be surprised what sorts of secrets they stowed away in this school.

Stuff the Headmaster wouldn’t make a public stink about, even if he found it gone. Some things were important to keep discreet above all else. And that worked in favor of the Sorcerer's Apprentice.

Hugo hoped Don was happy with his work, at least; would make the exhaustion worthwhile.

He only truly woke up once Olivia, lovable menace that she was, jumped onto his face.

“I’m up, I’m up,” he said, moving her off him.

Hugo slinked out of bed, fumbling for his glasses on his bedside table. Once he had them on, his eyes adjusted.

The room was filled with bright light from the morning sun, and the distant roaring of the griffins outside was streaming in through the window.

Varian was nowhere to be found.

Hugo figured it was for the best. It was a good sign that his stunt last night had worked, and that his roommate would steer clear of him going forward.

Don would be pleased, at least.

With a final self-shove, he swung his legs onto the floor and stood up. While he did his morning stretches, Olivia ran over to the raccoon on the other side of the room, preparing to rudely wake him. Hugo laughed nervously, speeding up his pace getting dressed, in order to avoid their chaos. He ended up opting for his usual attire: a green button up shirt, dark green unbuttoned jacket with padded shoulders, gray jeans, fingerless gloves, and worn soft leather boots. It was a good look on him.

Back at home, he didn’t always have time to spend on his appearance. Too much work to do, and, with Don’s expectations so high, not enough hours in the day. But here, despite still feeling her looming presence, he liked to allow himself the joys of a stylish look.

By the time he finished getting ready, the two animals were running around the room. Olivia had successfully annoyed the raccoon into joining her antics.

Hugo smiled. “Have fun you two! Don’t kill each other while I’m gone. Bye!”

Grabbing the hair tie from his bureau, and adjusting the book bag hanging across his body, Hugo ran to the door. When he reached it, though, he skidded to a stop. On the oak door, a blue sticky note read:

New rule: No taking personal belongings.

Hugo rolled his eyes. He took out a pen from his bag and wrote onto the note with rushed penmanship:

Okie dokie, Sweetheart.

With that, Hugo sauntered out the door, joining the other students making their way down the hall. He’d mapped out his schedule during his wandering yesterday, so he remembered exactly where he was headed. The blond let a relaxed smile reach his face as he walked, running his hands through his hair as he tied it into a ponytail, reassured knowing his first class of the day would be a piece of cake.

Science and Sorcery. From the syllabus alone, Varian had a suspicion that this was going to be his favorite class of the year, so he had arrived early for the first day. So early, it seemed, that he was the first student there.

Each two person desk already held two matching sets of safety gear, glass beakers, colorful substances. Varian’s mind began to theorize what they could be and what they could do. After sitting down at a random desk, he flipped his notebook open to a fresh page and began to jot down his ideas.

Chemicals (wear your goggles!!!)

- *Blue, bubbling liquid, warm beaker*

- *Red, powder, small beaker with cap, possibly a core reactant ?*

- *Yellow, still liquid, somewhat solidified, freezing cold beaker*

- *Green substance, nature unknown—*

“Well, hello there,” a voice appeared next to Varian. Startled, the young man jumped out of his seat with a yelp, landing on the floor with a thud.

A laugh burst from the voice. Varian looked up and couldn’t hide his surprise, nor his disappointment at who he saw.

“Hugo.”

The blond grinned. “The one and only!”

So, sleeping beauty has awoken. Varian thought.

The dark haired student looked around. Other students had begun filtering in. A few looked at him with concerned expressions. Embarrassed, and certainly a little mad at Hugo for scaring him (and still for last night), Varian quickly got off the floor and back into his seat. Hugo took the seat right next to him, keeping his eyes on the dark haired student, who scowled at him.

“I didn’t expect you to be here, Goggles! I thought science was just a hobby of yours.”

“You’ll find I’m quite the scientist, *Glasses*. I’m an alchemist,” he said, trying to sound confident. The memory of last night was still fresh, and his pride felt deeply threatened.

Hugo hummed. “The combination of science and magic? A man after my own heart.”

Varian rolled his eyes, making a note on the paper in front of himself.

Hugo barely noticed, as he continued talking. “Well, as a skilled user of both, Sorcerer's Apprentice after all, I’ll be sure to give you some pointers,” the blond coughed. “So, no hard feelings about last night? I mean, they’re just goggles, Goggles. If they broke, I’d have bought you new ones.”
Probably not, but he doesn’t know that, Hugo thought.

Varian looked up from his notebook. If looks could kill, Hugo would be in trouble. Luckily, they didn’t and he wasn’t, so he just stared right back at him.

Varian took a deep breath and turned back to his writing.

Then, the chatter of the classroom was cut short by the sound of a door opening. Both students looked and saw Professor Rumpelstiltskin enter the room and begin writing on the chalkboard at the front of the room.

“Today we will work individually, to test your individual skill levels. You will be tasked with determining the optimal measurements and chemicals to create what I am describing here on the board,” he set down the piece of chalk in his hand.

All around the room, panicked murmurs could be heard. From the row in front of Varian, a girl with purple and black streaked hair stood up and raised her pale hand. She wore a purple skirt and a black top, lined with a silver collar and shoulder pads. Varian had seen her before. Everyone had seen her before. This was Raven Queen, daughter of the Evil Queen.

“Um, Professor?” her voice was shockingly polite for a future villain. “Do we get to know exactly *what chemicals* we are working with?”

“No.”

Around them, the murmurs grew into full volume exchanges.

“Quiet!” The Professor sat in his chair. “You may begin at your own discretion.”

Varian frowned, taking a moment to slip on the gloves he’d been provided, before looking down at the chemicals in front of him. They were vague, yes, but Varian could deduce what they were. Given that they needed to be school approved substances (a list that Varian was all too aware of), and comparing that to his earlier observations, they could really only be...

Varian lowered his goggles over his eyes, and got to work.

For Hugo, the chemicals and their compositions were easy to deduce. All things he had worked with before. From there, he quickly fell back on muscle memory. It was like he was back at home again, in the lair with Don. Or maybe, it was drowsiness making him think that. Right now, he really wished he could have that extra hour back.

Then, a sudden movement beside Hugo caught his eye. It was Varian.

Varian was measuring and mixing through the assignment at a breakneck speed, moving like a well oiled machine, like it was what he was always meant to do. His expression was nothing short of sheer confidence. Hugo was almost inclined to feel humbled.

But instead Hugo pitied him. With the pace he was at now, Freckles was probably only seconds away from a screw up.

At the adjacent desk, a girl with platinum blonde hair added an ingredient and the concoction went up in disappointing smoke. She wore a red dress with a medium length ballroom skirt. Hugo had seen her before. Everyone had seen her before. This was Apple White, daughter of Snow White. This class certainly wasn’t that ‘destiny’ aligned for her, but it was obvious how she got in. She was Royalty. And Royalty always got what they wanted.

Hugo huffed a laugh at her misfortune, before getting back to work.

From the looks of his incomplete solution, all it needed was the final component and then...

P O O F

Hugo whipped his head towards the sound. There sat the completed solution, right in front of Varian.

“Very well done, Varian Gale! First to complete the assignment. An A for you, for now.” The Professor grumbled.

From the row adjacent to them, Apple White gave him a polite clap of approval, but Hugo didn’t even register it in his mind. Hugo was, well, stunned. Hugo was almost always the first to (successfully) finish assignments like this. It was a source of pride for him, a kind of reinforcement that he was on the right track, and certainly more skilled than his peers. His surprise mirrored that of Varian’s the other day, when he realized they shared a love of science and magic.

But what Varian had wasn’t just a love for those fields, it was a talent, and looking at Varian now, the young man was practically glowing.

Hugo clicked his tongue, turning back to his own solution with a new found urgency.

P O O F

“Very good, Hugo Cast,” the Professor shouted. “Pick up the pace next time. A minus for you.”

Hugo sighed, satisfied but not entirely so.

And then he looked over at Varian, who was staring right back at him, straight into his eyes. On his face, a prideful, smug smile illuminated, which made Hugo squint despite himself, feeling the same sudden rush as in their room before, but now with more sting. The freckled student may as well have been holding a knife to the blond’s throat.

Oh this little shit, Hugo thought.

Over in Varian’s mind, he was simply soaring with pride, seeing this utter jerk, this self-centered asshole, look so dumbfounded and bested. With one hand, and without breaking eye contact with his roommate, Varian adjusted his goggles slightly, enough to say exactly what he wanted Hugo to hear.

Farm boy huh? Well, this farm boy might just be better than even you, Sorcerer’s Apprentice.

Then, the subtle *click* they felt back in their room fell into place with a resounding sonic *boom* , an echoing and unignorable feeling. That was when they both realized, without room for any doubt, exactly how they felt towards each other:

Rivalry.

Neither could hide a determined, loathing filled, smile.

And so the war of wits began.

Chapter End Notes

>:) This is where the fun begins.

Kudos and comments are always welcome! Hope y'all have a lovely day!

FIRST DAY Part 2: Lunch and Least Favorites

Chapter Summary

Lunch leads to old friends and new information, before both Varian and Hugo must face their least favorite classes.

Chapter Notes

I RETURN! Life has been hitting like a train recently, but that hasn't halted my writing entirely. Thank you so much for over 50 kudos!!! It means the world to me that this AU is bringing some joy! As a treat, this chapter is the longest one yet. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The tone set in Science and Sorcery carried over into Chemythstry and Magicology, both of which Hugo and Varian were in together. Lucky them to get three classes in a row together. A prospect that would have annoyed the two of them prior to starting their rivalry in that first fateful class.

Now, it was an opportunity.

Next up was Chemythstry, which was also taught by Professor Rumpelstiltskin. In this class, they were given multiple assignments for the day. On some, Hugo did better. On others, Varian did better.

Unfortunately for Varian, Hugo gained the upper hand in Magicology, their third class of the day. Varian rationalized it as being due to the inherent perks of growing up around magic and being the Sorcerer's son. He also attributed it to the instructor, Madam Baba Yaga, being clearly peeved that a non-magic track student was in her oh-so-important class.

Hugo would rather attribute it to himself being better and smarter, but tomatoe tomAto.

Neither was matched by anyone else in the classes, though; not that they even noticed. All their focus in those hours was on each other. Despite this close proximity, their bigger issues remained undiscussed.

Who needs "talking about interpersonal issues" when they could just (figuratively) pummel each other into the ground with SCIENCE!

Before they knew it, the bell for lunch rang. As they walked out the door of the classroom, both subtly shoving to be the first out, neither could stop themselves from speaking to the other.

"See you around, *Goggles* ," Hugo said with a condescending tone.

“*Ohoho*, I look *forward* to it,” Varian said, his voice dripping with sarcasm and sass.

With that, they went their separate ways.

Varian, for one, hoped he did not have to see the blond in any more of his classes today. Three were already far too many.

Regardless, he was still completely absorbed in thinking about how those first three classes went; where he could improve and why. But the hallway was crowded, and as was inevitable, the dazed Varian bumped into someone and fell to the floor.

“Hey, you oka— Varian!”

He looked up and smiled wide at who he saw.

“Eugene!” The shorter of the two stood and embraced his friend. When they parted, the pair shook hands, which for them involved quite a few extra movements, as was tradition for the official Team Awesome secret handshake.

“So good to see you!”

“You too, man! How’s my favorite alchemist doing? Hey, are you heading to lunch?” Varian nodded, and Eugene continued. “I’ll hex the gang, we can all eat together!”

Varian sighed. “That sounds great.”

“Hold up,” Eugene stopped the alchemist in his tracks. “I know that tone. What happened?”

“Let’s just say it’s some roommate troubles. I’ll explain later. How was your summer?”

“It was really wonderful, just what I needed! Rested, relaxed, got my summer tan, the works,” Eugene Pauper, son of the Pauper, dove straight into a recounting of his summer shenanigans. Varian figured this was going to take the whole walk to the Castleteria, so he mentally settled in.

Now that move-in was over, and that the first day was in full swing, Ever After High was filled to the brim with students. Consequently, the Castleteria was incredibly crowded. Students from all walks of life packed like sardines, many of whom were magically and impulsive. Truly, it was a powder keg. Most students had bets on when the first incident would happen.

If Varian had to guess, he’d say within the day.

Additionally, the social divide, intentionally or not, had already begun appearing in the seating arrangements. The Castleteria had two levels, separated by a staircase leading up to the higher level, or down to the lower, depending on which way you went. The higher part of the room did not physically tower over the other, but it certainly felt that way. Always had. Cause that was (for the most part) where the Royal students sat.

Needless to say, Varian did not sit up there often. Again, there wasn’t anything *stopping* him but... why would he when his friends didn’t?

Once Varian and Eugene got their food (Varian grabbing extra since he had forgotten to eat breakfast that day. Big oops), they went searching around the Castleteria for their friends. Luckily, their friends found them first.

“Over here!” A friendly voice bellowed from the table by the window. Multiple arms waved at the pair.

“Hey gang,” Eugene waved to the table. “Team Awesome has arrived!”

Rapunzel squealed. Across from her, another familiar face laughed jovially.

“Finally! Rapunzel has absolutely refused to hand out the treats she made until all friends were accounted for!” Lance Midas exclaimed, layering in the drama.

“Speaking of which,” the young woman smiled, revealing five mini bags. “We made donut holes in Cooking Class-ic today!”

Everyone’s eyes lit up.

“Thanks Sunshine!” Eugene swooned.

“And thank Cassandra!” Rapunzel added. “She helped a lot with these!”

“In exchange for extras,” Cassandra opened her own mini bag. “We may both be in that class, Raps, but only one of us likes being there,” despite her words, Cass was smiling.

“Charming as ever Cass,” Eugene dead-panned.

Lance laughed. “Seriously though, you’re cooking is the only thing that is going to get us through this year’s lunch menu,” Lance Midas cried.

“Oh it’s not that bad!” Eugene said. “The meatloaf actually has meat in it this year!”

“Took them long enough,” Cassandra muttered.

“Come on, it’s old Grimm we’re talking about! I’m sure he made it his top priority!” Lance joked, laying on thick sarcasm.

“Absolutely,” Eugene played along. “Right after suppression of free will and getting that stick further up his—” Rapunzel elbowed him, but she was giggling too.

Varian laughed, happy to see his most joyful duo of friends together again. “I’m guessing you two are roommates again this year?”

Lance grinned wide. “Yep, no one else can handle Eugene’s hair-care routine.”

Eugene faux gasped in offense before laughing with his friend.

“Speaking of roommates,” Rapunzel interjected, and Varian groaned in anticipation. “How did the talk go with yours, Varian?”

“Uh, not great.”

Eugene lifted an eyebrow. “You got a roommate this year? Who is it?”

“Hugo Cast.”

“Hugo?!” Suddenly, he was a lot less jovial “Oh that little-” Eugene made a series of wild gestures.

“You’ve met?”

“Met? We went to the same Reform School!”

Varian had already been aware of Eugene’s history at that place, but to hear that Hugo was there too was certainly a surprise. He decided to mentally log that piece of info away.

Rapunzel nudged her boyfriend. “That was a long time ago, Eugene. However bad he may have been, I’m sure he’s as different as you are now.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Varian frowned. “Last night, I tried the whole talking-things-out thing, the one we talked about, Rapunzel, and it ended with him throwing my googles out the window.”

“He what?!” All the other voices at the table exclaimed in unison.

Before anyone could respond, a loud whoosh erupted from the other end of the Castleteria. Varian looked and saw black and blue flames. Above them, a similarly color schemed student with silver leaf-like wings was floating, angrily shouting something unintelligible at another student.

Guess I was right. Within the day.

Panic ensued. Students uproared and ran away and dashed to get a closer look and everything in between.

“We need to get some water on that!” Rapunzel stood and shouted, running towards the kitchen of the Castleteria, rushing past a few other students running out of the room.

“Wait!” Varian yelled. “Look at the flames! That’s a magical fire! Water won’t stop it! It needs to be smothered out with magic!” He grabbed his school bag, which carried all his textbooks and portable equipment.

Then, he did what any rational, totally not reckless student would do and ran towards the fire. As he did, he felt an arm try to stop him, but he slipped just past their fingertips. He quickly sped to the steps leading up to the elevated part of the Castleteria, where the fire seemed to originate. If he was lucky, he’d get to it before it started to spread.

As he ran, he dug into his bag to find something he could use to put out the fire. But, once he made it up the steps, he only felt the fire’s heat on him for a moment, before it suddenly vanished.

Standing just beside where the fire had just been was Hugo, holding his own textbook and an empty bottle of something that glowed on the scorched spot.

Quiet returned to the Castleteria, only to be immediately replaced by vocal relief for the prevention of a disaster, and admiration.

Off to the side, an administrator arrived to dish-out a detention sentence to the student responsible, but Varian wasn’t paying attention to that.

“That was crazy! Thank goodness you were here,” a student wearing pink with crown shaped glasses on her head, who he vaguely recognized as the daughter of Sleeping Beauty, Briar Beauty, said with a sigh.

“Absolutely!” Said another student, one with bears printed on her blue and yellow dress, who he definitely recognized as the daughter of Goldilocks, Blondie Lockes, the school’s most renowned student reporter. “You’ll have to come tell my Mirrorcast audience later how you acted so fast!”

Hugo just stood there, his stance casual, but clearly soaking up all the praise, his confidence obvious in his face.

Varian couldn’t roll his eyes hard enough. Unfortunately, because the Universe loved to make him miserable and shove this obnoxiously competent jerk in his face, Hugo noticed him and immediately waltzed over.

“Pretty cool seeing me in action, huh?”

“I was about to put it out, just so you know; you were just closer.”

Hugo hummed in mock understanding. “Oh, for sure,” he straightened his jacket before continuing to speak. “Not that you should’ve. It takes an experienced magic user to act in situations like this. I’ve seen enough magic fire explosions to know. Kinda destined for the opposite problem, but still. It happens.” Then, the bastard smirked. “Probably for the best that you didn’t help. If you had, you may have gotten in trouble. Outside of the classroom, magic and magical sciences are only supposed to be used by students destined to do so.”

Varian scowled, but turned it into a spiteful laugh. “Which is very lucky for you, since I can beat you any day of the week.” Then, he smelled something off, and looked down.

The end of Hugo’s pants was on fire. The blond suddenly noticed too, letting out a high toned squeak.

Without thinking, Varian grabbed a ball of alchemical neutralizer from his bag and threw it at Hugo’s ankle, putting out the flame.

Both students caught their own breaths. Hugo crossed his arms.

“Thanks for ruining my pants,” he said, gesturing to the goo now covering the end of one pant leg.

Varian’s expression twisted. “Next time I’ll let you catch on fire then,” he quickly turned and stormed off, back to his actual friends, not wanting to give the blond the chance to return the insult.

“Never a dull moment in this school,” Lance stated as Varian returned to their table.

“Was that Hugo up there?” Rapunzel asked.

“Yes,” Varian responded. Before anyone could say another word, Varian, still riled up, began to rant and gripe about Hugo being in his first few classes. The others had, of course, seen Varian this passionate before. But normally, his outbursts were reserved for alchemy, science, or magic related topics; rarely did he get this worked up over some guy.

Oddly, Varian didn’t seem entirely angry about Hugo being in his science classes. Far from it, he seemed excited. Although Varian himself did not seem to recognize this. But his friends did, on

varying levels. Least of all Eugene, and most of all Rapunzel.

Clearly, this would not be the last time they heard about the infamous roommate.

“If I had known about that sooner he wouldn't have gotten the upper hand! Well, he'll see tomorrow when I—” The rant was cut short as the bell rang and the remaining students began shuffling out of the Castleteria.

“Crap, I've got to get to class,” Varian muttered.

“Same here, I have to run to Damsel-in-Distressing,” Rapunzel stood.

“So glad I got that class over with last year,” Cassandra said. .

“Have fun, bud,” Eugene called. “And remember what we talked about! We'll continue this conversation later,” he stressed.

“Yeah, I'll hold you to that.” Varian certainly would. If Eugene had a history with Hugo, he wanted to know. The more he knew about his new rival/enemy/roommate, the better.

After lunch, Hugo had what he knew would be his least favorite class of the year: Damsel-in-Distressing.

Getting him to sign up for the class was like pulling teeth, both for the administration and for himself. So what if his destiny was *technically* to be a damsel-in-distress and get saved by the Sorcerer? Hugo could take care of himself just fine. It was the one part of his destiny he didn't like. He'd been secretly hoping he could just avoid the course all together. But, after a lengthy debate with Mother Dearest over the summer, he had caved.

“Why do I need to be in this class!” He had whined.

“You've been putting it off long enough Hugo. The Sorcerer's Apprentice needs to be saved, making you a Damsel-in-Distress, and thus, you need to attend that class.”

“It's humiliating.”

“It's destiny. You're taking it and that's final.” And it was final.

At least that part of his destiny would be brief. Unlike this class, which would be *agonizingly* long.

And so here he was, standing with mostly princesses in one of the school's highest towers. The class itself was never set in a particular place. Hugo knew that going in, which was why he took extra care to find where it would be this week. For now, the class would be taking place in the south tower of the school. At least the seats there were comfortable.

The whole point of the class was to teach people how to act *helpless*. Hugo had had enough of being helpless a long time ago.

But, this was for the sake of his destiny. So, he would do it.

He would do anything it took.

Even if “anything” included brushing shoulders with a bunch of royal pains.

And they were all, in fact, royal pains.

Royal, as in actual royalty: princesses mostly. Future world leaders, in charge of countless citizens, taught to be demure and wait for a solution. He knew that those lessons would carry over into their adult selves. He had seen that first hand. It made him sick.

Pains, as in highly annoying: Donella never had to deal with this shit as the Sorcerer. The Sorcerer wasn’t destined to work for any particular Queen or King or thankfully any Princess. It was allowed, but not required of Don, so she didn’t. Working independently helped keep her more *illegal* activities under wraps. Hugo planned to follow her footsteps to the letter in that regard. If he never crossed paths with another Princess as the Sorcerer, he would die a happy man.

“Now then, damsels, let’s begin with our first day,” the Professor, Madam Maid Marian’s voice, pulled him from his exacerbated thoughts.

Most of the beginning lecture was introductory drivel. At some point into it, however, Hugo noticed that someone was looking at him. A student with a round face and long golden hair in a thick braid. He’d think she was a dumb blonde if that wouldn’t be entirely hypocritical of him, a fellow blond. She had green eyes like he did, but hers might as well have been a different light spectrum because they shown kindness and understanding. He knew for a fact that his eyes didn’t have that effect. She kept subtly turning back to look at him throughout the lecture.

It was a little creepy.

Eventually, though, Madam Maid Marian had the students vacate their seats and follow her on a tour of the other locations the class would be using. Hugo took this as a chance to stretch his legs, stare at anything other than the other students, and move away from the blonde who kept staring at him.

Unfortunately, she caught up to him almost immediately.

“Are you Hugo Cast?”

As he avoided looking at her face, Hugo noticed she was barefoot. Not exactly a lady-like fashion choice. But, it did make him curious enough to respond to her.

“That *is* the name the Professor called me during attendance, so take a guess.”

She tilted her head, her smile still bright. “But is it your name?”

Hugo sighed. “Yeah.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Rapunzel,” her cheerful expression waned. “Could I have a word with you?”

“You already are but sure.”

She slowed her walking pace, as did he, until the two of them were at the back of the group.

“You’re rooming with Varian.”

Hugo tapped his chin, suddenly feeling a little more jovial. “Varian, Varian... doesn’t ring a bell. I am rooming with a short, freckled, raccoon owning, unreasonably science obsessed menace of a student. Perhaps we’re thinking of the same person?”

Rapunzel hummed, her tone not quite discernible.

By then, the class had reached a cliff side part of the school. As Madam Maid Marian spoke of future assignments and outdoor classes, Hugo tried to wander away from Rapunzel. He found himself wandering to look over the edge. Heights didn’t particularly frighten Hugo, but they certainly did make him nervous. This cliff especially. The school was high and built on a hill, leading down to a valley containing an abandoned dragon games arena and the seemingly endless forests. The blond tried to turn his mind to how he could use this location on certain jobs. If he planned ahead, brought some climbing gear with him, this spot could be helpful.

A sway of blonde caught Hugo’s eye, making him look to his side. Rapunzel was waltzing along the edge of the cliff, seemingly without a care in the world. Hugo was slightly slack jawed.

“Varian mentioned a bit about you at lunch,” Rapunzel said, still walking along the edge.

Hugo smirked. “All good things, I’m sure; like how I kicked his butt in Magicology.”

“And how he kicked yours in Chemythstry,” Rapunzel said cheekily. Hugo winced despite himself, smothering his reaction as she continued. “I think you two have a lot in common.”

Hugo rolled his eyes. Rapunzel moved back onto more solid ground, leaving Hugo between her and the cliff’s end.

“I think you and Varian could be great friends if you tried. So, I’m going to trust that you two can work your issues out yourselves and live together in peace. Because most of all, I think there’s more to you than you like to let on.”

Rapunzel’s smile fell. She stared into the retina of his eyes.

“However...” His shirt was suddenly twisted as her hand grabbed him and held tight. He was suddenly acutely aware of how not-far he was from the ground’s end. Not close enough to fall were he pushed, but close enough to send a message. He’d been sent messages like this before.

“Believe me when I say this,” she said. “If you hurt Varian, or anything important to him again, you will answer directly to me. Am I being clear?”

Hugo purposefully met her with an unimpressed look.

“I’ve dealt with much worse people than you, Princess.”

“So have I,” the Princess shot back at the Sorcerer’s Apprentice. “Are we *clear*?”

“Crystal.”

She let go of his shirt and brought him fully back onto his feet, before going back to walking along the cliff’s edge. Hugo let out a breath he didn’t recall ever holding in the first place.

“Ms. O’Hair! Away from the cliff now please!” The Professor shouted. “I should give you detention for behavior like that!”

Ooh someone's in trouble. Hugo thought, not repressing a sly grin.

Then, the Madam smiled. "However, I am very pleased that you do not fear heights. You are a credit to your story, Ms. O'Hair." Rapunzel beamed at the praise.

Hugo scoffed. *Typical.*

"You, however, Mr. Cast!" Hugo winced as her attention turned to him. "You being that close has no excuse. Report to detention after school. If you have Legacy Day Training today, report after that."

Oh you have got to be kidding me.

To her credit, Rapunzel did look apologetic. That wasn't enough to land her in Hugo's good graces.

Hero Training. The class Varian had been least looking forward to.

Thankfully, he had a friend there with him.

Cassandra was tough, no-nonsense, and skeptical to a dangerous degree. She's the type to understand the phrase "curiosity killed the cat". Meanwhile Varian was the type to chuck it out the window in favor of "fuck around and find out". Personalities aside, the two of them had a lot in common. Both felt out of place as children, both have reservations about their destinies (Cassandra's as a lady-in-waiting for a little known fairytale princess who she was barely even friends with), they both have knights (or former knights in Varian's case) for fathers, and neither had a mother anymore.

They had met in middle school, same as with Rapunzel, and Varian had developed a massive unrequited crush on her pretty much immediately. He always cringed remembering how obvious his pining had been. At one point going so far as to name a new element he created with alchemy after her (which she never let him live down). But, over the years those feelings had turned into a strong platonic respect. She was even the first person he came out to as bi, and in return she trusted him enough to tell him that she was a lesbian. He had felt safe confiding in her ever since. And, although she wouldn't say it, she found a confidant in him too.

"Oh! You never said how your first day has been!" Varian said, as he moved his goggles to his eyes.

Cass groaned. "Nothing good to report. Grimm put me in Anger Magicment as my first class."

"I mean," Varian rubbed the back of his neck. "Didn't you threaten him with a sword?"

"Rapunzel exaggerates. It was a dagger and it just fell out." Cass said. "It fell out, and embedded itself into his desk."

Varian winced. "And they put you in Anger Magicment? Shocking."

Their conversation was cut short when Professor Knight called everyone's attention. For the first day, they would be put into pairs and spar with wooden swords. True to her word, Cassandra's enthusiasm never dipped, even when she got paired with Varian rather than one of the other

students. She definitely wanted the chance to best some of the self-important future heroes in this course, but today she was fine sticking with her friend.

So, the majority of class was made up of Cass winning and Varian losing. Eventually, they were all given the five minute warning, causing her mood to dip and his to exponentially improve.

“The things we do for the classes we *actually* want to take,” he laminated.

“Speak for yourself. This is right where I want to be.” Suddenly, an imaginary lightbulb went off above her head. “Shit! I totally forgot to tell you. Did you hear what happened at Apple White’s Legacy Day rehearsal?”

“No? My rehearsal is later today, before dinner.”

“Well, apparently, hers was earlier and Raven Queen was there, and she asked Headmaster Grimm what would happen if she didn’t want to sign the book!”

“Really?” Varian asked, suddenly breathless.

“Yes, and he told her that if she didn’t, she and everyone in her story would go ‘poof’, as in just, disappear. Not that I would even believe that—”

Varian went silent, processing the information. Cassandra went on to say that Raven ran away from rehearsal after that. Then Cass began verbally ripping into Headmaster Grimm, but by that point Varian wasn’t listening.

Going ‘poof’. Disappearing.

Could that have happened to Mom?

No, no that couldn’t be. Everyone else from their story was still here.

Varian was still here.

He needed more details.

Unfortunately, this distraction allowed for Cass to get the upper hand, landing an easily blockable hit to his head.

“Ow!” Varian rubbed his head.

“Sorry about that. Are you good?”

“Yeah, don’t worry! It’s just a-” Varian moved his hand away to reveal a few specks of red.

Fun fact about Varian: he has a phobia of blood!

So, after seeing said blood, the freckled young man promptly passed out, waking up in the nurse’s office.

Was it embarrassing? Yes.

Was he already planning to use this as an excuse to get out of Hero Training tomorrow? Also, yes.

Chapter End Notes

Rebellious questions forming? In my story? It's more likely than you may think.

Hope y'all enjoyed this one! Working out these class schedules was quite the task, but they are finally set in stone. Kudos and comments are always welcome! NOW GO DRINK SOME WATER!!!

FIRST DAY Part 3: Questions (And Answers)

Chapter Summary

Varian's questions pertaining to the Storybook of Legends pile up in preparation for Legacy Day Rehearsal.

Chapter Notes

THE FINAL PART OF THE FIRST DAY TRILOGY IS HERE!! After this the chapters will become more episodic for a while. I hope y'all enjoy this one!!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Rumors travel fast, but an alchemist's brain moves faster.

From the moment Cassandra had mentioned Raven Queen's questioning of the Storybook of Legends, and Headmaster Grimm's response, Varian's mind had been in a frenzy. Everything about the situation left him with endless questions rattling around his skull the more and more he thought about it.

All of it came back to that initial question of hers: What if someone didn't pledge to follow their destiny?

Could she do that? Could *Varian* do that?

So, finally able to sit and write, Varian ignored the main lecture, and Eugene's occasional joking beside him, and dedicated himself to logging down everything he was thinking.

Of course, that meant ignoring the class he was in. Oops.

At Ever After High, students' schedules were crafted to perfectly suit their destinies, with very little wiggle room for students to choose their own classes. Often, their classes are hyper specific to each student, with small class sizes as a result.

Rarely there are classes that every student, regardless of destiny, has to take.

But, rarely does not mean never. Consequently, massive lecture classes do exist.

One such class was the one he was currently ignoring: Hexonomics.

It was a jack-of-all-trades kind of class. The purpose being to give students a general run down of information that most citizens of Ever After, Wonderland, Oz, etc, should know. For example, the basic elements.

This topic should have been a breeze for Varian, especially on the first day when the workload wasn't in full swing yet. He could recite the basic elements in his sleep. And he has! Thankfully, he'd outgrown sleep talking. But pressing times call for pressing measures.

Varian had filled five pages with notes, questions, and frantic thoughts by the time he was pulled out of it.

“—Gale!”

Varian looked up.

“Your answer?” The Professor asked.

“Uh,” Varian tried to recall what the question was, but he hadn't been listening in the slightest. Finally, the Professor got impatient and gave up waiting for him.

“Would anyone like to fill in the blank for Mr. Gale?” A quiet chorus of giggles followed.

Varian cringed, trying to shrink himself down to the size of a baby chicken.

“Pixie dust, Professor!” A student in a sparkling purple dress answered.

“Correct!”

That's the easiest one! Varian mentally scolded himself.

“Very smooth, Goggles,” an unfortunately memorable, irritating voice behind Varian chimed in.

The dark haired student turned around and saw Hugo sitting in the row behind him, his face in his hands, grinning as if without a care.

Varian frowned, cursing himself for not noticing the nuisance earlier.

“Guess I used up all my smarts kicking your butt in Chemythstry today,” he responded pointedly.

Hugo's smile twisted unpleasantly and Varian smirked. But before the blond could say anything in response, another voice burst in.

“You!”

Hugo turned to the voice. “Rider?” he exclaimed in recognition, adjusting his glasses.

“Rider?” Varian echoed, more so in confusion.

Eugene went pale. “I'm not going by that name anymore. It's back to Eugene Pauper now.”

“Oh.” Hugo blinked. “Wait, the name you used in Reform School was fake?” He sounded perplexed.

“Of course it was fake! That's my whole destiny! Pretending to be someone else!”

Hugo raised an eyebrow at him. As did Varian.

“Mr. Pauper! Mr. Cast! No talking! I will hand out detentions, first day or not!”

“Already got one Professor,” Hugo called back.

Varian rolled his eyes, returning to his paper.

The Professor grumbled something in exacerbation, before continuing with the lecture.

Still unable to focus, though, Varian tried to return his energy to his Legacy Day questions. However, after that interaction, his mind kept drifting to Hugo and that infamous Reform School.

Varian himself had narrowly escaped being sent there in his younger days. Eugene, on the other hand, had not been so lucky to avoid it.

Eventually, class ended. Varian watched Hugo leave with a particularly noteworthy spring in his step. Probably happy to be done with classes for the day, like the rest of the students.

Unfortunately, Varian still had his extra class to attend.

Thank goodness he had awesome friends, who walked with him all the way there.

On the way, he reintroduced the topic of the Reform School to Eugene; specially Hugo’s placement there. To his relief, Eugene didn’t need to be told twice to talk about Hugo.

“That was where I first met him. He wasn’t there for very long, though. He got to leave after only a month! Apparently, his ‘good behavior’ made him eligible for returning to school. Good behavior my behind! He ran in the same little circle as me at that place, but somehow everyone else always got in trouble for *his* shit!”

“Do you know what he was there for?” Varian pressed.

“Same reason as me: Stealing. I do recall his mother making a huge stink about it on drop-off day. I vividly remember how he looked when she got all up in arms. Didn’t think someone that pale could get paler. I don’t think he regretted stealing though; more like he regretted getting caught.”

Varian groaned. “So not only is he an asshole, and a jerk, he’s also a thief.” Varian had had his suspicions after their meeting with Grimm, sure, but to hear the history of it was more damning.

Eugene was clearly going to agree with the freckled student, before Rapunzel shot him a stern look. He reluctantly sighed. “Well, not necessarily. It was a long time ago. I’ve definitely changed since then, maybe he has too. Besides, I had my reasons for stealing. I never asked for his, and he never told me, but who knows.”

Rapunzel smiled. Varian was sure she wanted him to pick the more optimistic outlook on all this. Maybe it was hypocritical of him not to, considering his own past mistakes. But a youth in the lab had taught Varian that leaving any variable up to chance could spell disaster. So, he mentally planned to be more vigilant about the blond from here on out.

When they reached the classroom, Rapunzel took Varian by the shoulders quite suddenly, startling the young man.

“Try to be optimistic about this guy.”

Just as he thought. Varian feigned a reassuring smile. “I will.”

“But, if he treats you badly again, tell me.”

“You better,” Eugene added.

“I will, I promise,” Varian laughed.

“Good,” Rapunzel hugged him. “Oh! And good luck at Legacy Day Rehearsal today!”

At the mention of the rehearsal, the cloud of curiosity returned to Varian’s mind. As did the chill that always came with anything relating to Legacy Day.

Varian frowned nervously, before rushing off to his final class of the day.

Extra classes at Ever After High were rarely used by the student body at large. The average student certainly didn’t *want* to be in classes longer than they had to be. On top of that, most students didn’t even get the option to do so. These courses were for the overachievers and the falling behinders. The students who asked for the class, or students who had to take them to avoid summer school.

Crownculus was one such option. It was being held in a small classroom. There were only a dozen desks, and plenty of them were still empty halfway through the hour.

The subject itself wasn’t too bad. Complex math equations and theoretical work. Not exactly Varian’s favorite but he would get through it.

If he could get past question sixteen on his paper, which had tormented him for the past fifteen minutes.

At least it was a good distraction from his rehearsal questions. As badly as he wanted answers, wanted to know more about how the Storybook worked, and if not signing was without consequence... It was a lot to think about. Emotionally.

Varian didn’t want to think about Legacy Day; didn’t want to think about how it was so close on the horizon that rehearsals were already happening. Didn’t want to think about how soon his life would get infinitely worse when he signed.

If he signed.

If *‘if’* was even a possibility.

But, if ‘going poof’ was the outcome...

“Are you okay?”

Beside him sat a girl he vaguely recognized from Hexonomics. She had sparkly brown eyes and wore a glittery purple dress with a winding constellation pattern.

“What?”

She raised an eyebrow. “You’re staring daggers at your paper.”

Varian grimaced. “Yeah, I’m fairy stuck.”

The student hummed. “Sixteen?”

“Yep.”

“Did you divide by pi?”

“Yes.”

“Did you add the other sum?”

“Yes.”

“Did you square it?”

“Ye-” he reexamined the paper. “Fuck,” he laughed.

“Well, there you go!” She laughed with him. “I’ve had that habit before in other subjects, looking too closely at the problem. Sometimes stepping back to examine it makes it better. You can’t look at one star and expect to see the whole sky, you know?”

Varian nodded. “I like the metaphor.”

“Thank you!” Then, she held out her hand. “I’m Nuru Star.”

He shook it. “Varian Gale.”

“Yeah, I know. We have Magicology class together.”

“We do?!”

“Uh, yeah. Madam Yaga called on you alot. I think she was mad that you were right at times,” Nuru joked. “You seemed very focused on your work, and that one lanky blond sitting next to you.”

Varian groaned. “That’s just Hugo. He’s my roommate, and the absolute worst. Sorry I didn’t say hello earlier.”

“Don’t worry about it. You can make it up to me by being my friend in this class!”

The kindness in her voice bordered on regality.

“I’d like that,” Varian said with a genuine smile. The *if’s* that plagued him could wait their turn; because, at least for now, he was still Varian. Still just a student at Ever After High. Making friends and trying to get through his insane daily schedule.

Varian breathed a little easier as he decided he would cross that rehearsal shaped bridge when he got to it.

As Hugo ran to Legacy Day Rehearsal, he tried desperately to ignore his own exhaustion.

His lack of sleep was catching up to him.

On top of that, during his free block Cyrus had hexed him to do *another* job for Donella. He'd quickly done it, obviously, but after such a long day it wasn't like waving a magic wand.

All he wanted now was to get back to his room and collapse. But Donella would kill him if he skipped rehearsal. Honestly, he understood why it was important. He certainly didn't want to get onto that stage on Legacy Day and say the wrong thing or trip like an idiot.

However boring it might be, he had to attend Legacy Day Rehearsal.

But hey, it might not be so bad. A little test run of the day his life got infinitely better ought to lift his spirits! And hopefully his energy levels.

Not even Headmaster Grimm's presence would bring him down!

Luckily, the Headmaster didn't seem too concerned with Hugo at the moment.

Right from the get-go, Grimm was clearly on edge, surveying the incoming students with an air of caution. Briefly, Hugo wondered if this has something to do with the item he stole the other night, or right before this. Thankfully, that idea was quickly sweep away when the Headmaster began the session by stating:

"I trust that everyone will behave themselves and act respectfully during this time?"

Ah, so someone got on Grimm's shit list today. Hugo thought. *Someone in this group, or another?* Hugo glanced around at his fellow students, his eyes locking onto a familiar silhouette.

Varian was here. The young man was entirely absorbed in a notebook he was writing in, so he did not notice the blond.

Same thing as in Hexonomics. Hugo mentally noted.

Throughout most of that class, Hugo had noticed Varian furiously scribbling in his notebook. At the time, he figured his roommate was simply being excessively diligent in that subject, however elementary the subject was.

It surprised him, then, that the note taking continued into rehearsal.

What was there to take notes on?

Even as the Headmaster began speaking, Varian did not look up, hidden just enough by the group that he was not called out.

"Welcome students. I trust that your first day was full of valuable lessons."

Some snickers followed.

"Now then, let us get started," the Headmaster said as he led the group up to the podium. "On Legacy Day, you will follow a strict order of students. When it is your turn, you will come up to the stage on this side. Please watch your step as these stairs are slightly steep."

"No shit," Hugo muttered as he followed the group. The whole school was old, so steep steps were common, but this was ridiculous.

What made it worse was the thick velvet carpet that covered the steps. This succeeded in adding color to the white marble stage. It also succeeded in making the steps even more hazardous.

In contrast, the old outdoor stage was towered over by four massive magic mirrors, which served as projectors for the audience that would sit and watch on Legacy Day, graduation day, and other school events.

Today they were turned off. The audience seats, counting in the hundreds, were empty. Hugo tried to imagine it all. The mirrors showing his face, the seats packed with students and parents, and his mother sitting somewhere among them.

Legacy Day couldn't come soon enough.

As he and the rest of the group spread out on the stage, the Headmaster continued.

“When you arrive at the podium, refrain from delaying. You will state your name, your parent of the same destiny, and that you are pledging to follow your destiny. Afterwards, your magically key will appear. Remember to handle your keys with extreme care. Magical or not, they are fragile and ___”

Maybe it was a force of habit, but Hugo could not bring himself to focus on Grimm's words. I mean, when his usual speeches are unimportant lectures and reprimands, you get used to tuning them out pretty quick.

“When you insert your key into the Storybook of Legends, the book will open and show you your destiny. At which point, the key will transform into a pen. Finally, you will at last sign your name, and honor your—”

Despite himself, Hugo found his attention shifting to the freckled young man adjacent to him. He shifted to read the notes on the paper, adjusting his glasses as he did. Rather than notes on Grimm's lecture, Goggles appeared to be bullet pointing questions pertaining to the Storybook of Legends.

Questions about the Storybooks powers, it's reach, and—

No way. He didn't plan to ask those, did he?

“—and declare your destiny to the world!”

Hugo's gaze snapped back to the Headmaster.

“Does anyone need clarification?”

“Oh,” Varian's hand shot up.

Grimm forced a smile. “Please save all questions for the end.”

“But you just said—”

“Who would like to go first and practice what will be said?” Grimm spoke.

The first student to go was named Nuru Star, apparently the daughter of the Twinkle Little Star. Nursery rhyme destinies were rare, and quite respected. Practically fairytale royalty. She certainly dressed the part, as her dress actually sparkled with crystals and glittering fabric.

Surprisingly, Varian paused from his note taking to talk with her, before jumping back into his paper blackhole. Perhaps they were friends.

Hugo had originally planned to go first, hoping to get through this fast so he could leave faster (and sleep sooner). However, he ended up letting more than a few students go before him, once he saw Varian go back to jotting down notes.

The other students didn't interest him much after that.

When Hugo did finally get called on by Grimm, (with a little too much disdain in his tone for his liking) Varian noticed he was there.

And by god, how fairy hilarious his expression was when they made eye contact.

"Have you been here the whole time?"

The blond sighed. "You should really pay more attention, Goggles. It's unbecfitting an *alchemist* not to." he said as he passed the shorter student.

When he arrived at the podium, Grimm cleared his throat and spoke quietly. "I hope your *Mother* has stressed to you the importance of Legacy Day."

Hugo wrestled a scowl.

"She has."

Then, he forced a smile as he rehearsed the words that would forever secure his safety.

"I am Hugo Cast, *son of the Sorcerer*," he added extra emphasis to the mention of his Mother. No matter what old farts like Grimm thought, he was Don's son and he deserved this destiny. "I pledge to follow my destiny as the next Sorcerer's Apprentice."

"That will do," Grimm said simply. Figures. Not like Hugo was worth an actual compliment in his eyes.

When Hugo got back to the group, Varian was still staring daggers at him.

"Next?" Grimm called.

Varian quickly scanned his notes again.

"Mr. Gale?" Grimm's patience wearing thin.

"Oh!" Immediately, his mood improved. He scurried up to the podium with a skip in his step.

"Headmaster, before I rehearse, I have a few questions if you don't mind?"

"I would rather you not—"

"Great!"

Hugo couldn't stop himself from snorting laughing.

“So,” Varian began. “I understand that when we sign we are tied to our destinies, but what I don’t understand is how exactly that works?”

“It’s magic, young man, now if you would—“

“I mean, of course it’s magic, but what are its boundaries? For example, if I said someone else’s name, instead of my own, would my story still show up or would there’s? What if I wrote the wrong signature?”

“Young man—“

“Oh! That reminds me! Why do we sign it before winter break? Have there ever been any stories that began while the students were still in school?”

“That is irrelevant to—“

“Nothing is ever truly irrelevant in research, Headmaster, but okay last question I swear: what exactly is ‘going poof’, Headmaster Grimm? And for that matter, what happens if we do not sign our name in the book?”

Hugo felt himself cringe. There it was: the “oh boy don’t ask that” question.

“Mr. Gale!” The Headmaster yelled. “That is quite enough!”

Varian’s mouth formed a tight thin line.

Headmaster Grimm seemed to collect himself, taking a breath. “If you don’t sign the Storybook of Legends, your story ceases to exist. Thus, you, and everyone involved in your story, will vanish from *existence* . Or, as you put it, go ‘poof’ . It would be as though you never existed at all.”

Varian said nothing, but the expression on his face showed Hugo that the gears of his mind were turning rapidly, processing the information, logging it away to be analyzed under a metaphorical microscope.

“Report to detention after rehearsal is done.”

“What?!” Varian exclaimed, furious. “All I did was ask a couple questions?”

Grimm’s face twisted. “Two detentions then! Now, will that be all? Or would you like me to call your parent on top of that?”

Varian said nothing, his silence speaking for him.

“Now, please proceed with the rehearsal.”

Varian did so, entirely reluctant and robotically.

“I am Varian Gale, son of Dorothy, and I pledge to follow my destiny as the next Dorothy.”

Grimm let out a sigh. “Thank you.”

From there the rehearsal simmered out. Grimm gave some pompous speech about the importance of each student upholding their legacy. But all throughout it Hugo’s own mind returned to Varian’s

last question.

Not signing the storybook... *could* someone do that? Don always made it seem like every destiny *had* to have a successor. Someone to carry it on, for everyone's sake.

That's why she adopted Hugo. That, and also to shut up Grimm and the more nosy members of Royalty.

Still, Hugo was a rarity in the system. Someone *chosen* to be given a destiny. That was why his place was so unstable in Don's eyes.

He never considered that the same might be true for everyone else.

"In a month, when Legacy Day arrives, you will all honor your destinies. Until then, continue to remind yourselves of who you are meant to be."

Varian flinched beside Hugo.

"That will be all. Dismissed."

As the students returned to the building and went their separate ways, Hugo nudged his shorter roommate.

"That was quite a show you put on back there."

Varian huffed. "All I did was ask a couple questions."

"And piss Grimm off."

The dark haired young man laughed humorlessly. "Yeah, cause that's *so difficult* to do."

Okay, that actually got a laugh out of Hugo. He quickly tried to hide it when he saw how smug Varian looked.

That expression vanished once they reached the detention room.

"Guess this is my stop. Lucky me," Varian mused.

A sly grin crept onto Hugo's face. "Well I do have some good news for you."

Varian raised an eyebrow. Hugo frowned.

"You won't be alone in detention."

That fact finally clicked in Varian's brain.

"I'm cursed. What else can explain how I keep getting stuck with *you*."

"A probable theory, my good man."

Then, Hugo's Mirrorphone buzzed.

Don had texted him.

How was rehearsal?

Hugo glanced at Varian.

Perhaps it would be best to let sleeping dogs lay, so to speak.

Uneventful.

Detention came and went in silence.

Until the Professor in charge fell asleep.

After that, all anyone wanted to talk about was Raven Queen. It seemed that word had traveled fast, both through word of mouth and through the Mirrornet. Everyone had something to say on the matter.

“Rebels?”

“That’s what people are calling non-Royals now,” Rapunzel said through her Facetime call with Varian. “Well, not non- *Royals* , more like people who don’t want to follow their destinies. Now everyone who *does* want to follow theirs is being called a Royal, Royalty or not.”

Varian scratched his head. “This may get confusing.”

“I know, right? It’s exciting though!” Rapunzel beamed. “I can’t wait to see what happens on Legacy Day!”

You and I both. Varian thought.

Off screen, a voice called for her.

“I’ve gotta go. Meet us for dinner later, okay?”

“Will do!” Varian ended the call with a smile. He could already guess how most of his friends would be feeling about all this.

As for his roommate...

“Can the people in this room talk about anything else?” Hugo complained. He had almost immediately gotten tired of the topic.

Varian raised an eyebrow at him.

“Sounds like you have your mind made up about all this. Are you thinking about not signing?”

Hugo vigorously shook his head. “Fuck no! My destiny is aye-okay with me,” he grinned.

Varian hummed. “I guess that makes you a Royal now.”

Hugo went pale. “Oh no, does it? Hex, that almost makes me *not* want to sign,” he said, deadly serious.

“Apologies, your Highness,” Varian joked.

“Do not call me that.”

“I can make no promises, your Highness,” Varian mimicked the blond’s voice.

Hugo groaned, shifting his glasses and running his hands over his face.

Varian sat and enjoyed his crisis.

Looking back around, the implications of this whole ‘Rebels’ thing began to set in. It was no wonder that there were so many students entranced by the idea of not signing, like Varian was. Especially in this room; most of the students in detention were future villains, who were given extra credit for causing trouble in school. For as enthusiastic as some future villains were, most, like Raven Queen, were quietly not so joyful about their destinies.

Villains didn’t get Happily-Ever-After, after all.

Varian wondered how many students with unhappy ends truly did not want to sign the Storybook of Legends. He wondered how many on top of that, who did have Happily-Ever-After, still didn’t want to.

His story was supposed to be a happy one for him, and even he didn’t want it.

Either way, despite what Headmaster Grimm may hope, it was clear that this was not the end of the talk of destiny, and the prospect of having a choice.

Hugo moved his hands from his face.

“Hey, Goggles, can I ask you something?”

“No I will not help you with your homework, but I’m flattered you would ask.”

“Ha. Ha. Very funny,” Hugo said sarcastically. “Seriously, Sweetcheeks, your game of 21 questions at Rehearsal had me thinking...”

Varian tentatively gave his roommate his attention.

“Do you *want* to follow your destiny?”

Varian went wide eyed.

“I–” Varian adjusted his goggles. “It’s just– It’s complicated.”

Hugo hummed. His curiosity almost propelling to ask more, before he remembered himself and his goal to maintain a distance. If last night and today were any indication, Don was going to have a lot of tasks for him this semester.

“Well, whatever your deal is, it’s none of my business.”

“Right, it isn’t.” Varian reasserted, without conviction. In all honesty, he wasn’t sure what to say.

Internally, he knew he had to ask *himself* that question first. Did he want to follow his destiny? No. There was no way around that. However, he didn't want anyone to go 'poof'.

Although, Varian had never even heard of something like that happening! What if Grimm was wrong, or lying?

Maybe... maybe he could hope. He could say what he wanted, and maybe even have it.

Varian wanted to be an alchemist. So...

"Actually, no," Varian turned back to Hugo, staring at him unwaveringly. "I don't want to follow my destiny."

Hugo stared back at him, giving him the once-over, searching for something Varian could not decipher.

"Oh well. It's your funeral."

Maybe.

Once detention ended, the two students went back to their dorm. It had been an exhausting first day, and both of them wanted a little peace after all of it, even if that peace had to be in each other's horrible company.

But peace? In their dorm room?

Never.

Upon opening the door, the two roommates found their living space a complete wreck, with the furry culprits responsible running around in a frenzy.

"Ruddiger!" Varian shouted.

"Olivia!" Hugo shouted at the same time.

Both pets froze, almost looking guilty.

The robot of the two ran to the blond and climbed into his jacket pocket.

"At least you didn't kill each other," Hugo scratched behind her ear. Although, his gaze remained fixed on his own work space, which was a mess.

Varian took a deep, purposeful breath, and slowly turned to his desk.

Oh thank Oz. His equipment was still intact. All over the place, but unshattered. Once again, Ruddiger proved to be an awesome buddy.

The freckled young man snuck another glance at Hugo's work space. In mostly the same condition as Varian's. Guess both their pets were considerate in their chaos.

In between their spaces, though... Yikes.

Varian summoned up a nonchalantly smile. “Oh would you look at the time! I’ve gotta get to dinner! Bye!”

“Wha– Hey! You can’t just leave me to deal with this!” Hugo protested.

“I absolutely can! Besides, you’re the one who’s destined to clean up messes.”

Oh that felt good to say; made all the sweeter by Hugo’s speechless blubbering.

“Come on buddy!” Varian called to Ruddiger, who quickly skittered onto his shoulder. “Let’s get you some apples.”

The blond went red.

“Farm boy!” Hugo yelled accusatively, being plain old petty.

“Your Highness!” Varian yelled back, with a little bow, being equally as petty.

As they left each other’s sight, both students, filled with ridiculous fury, thought the same thing.

I’ve got to out-do him in class tomorrow!

And so, with the story set in motion, the sun set on the first day at Ever After High.

Although the future was unclear, both to the student body and to the administration, Varian and Hugo knew two things for certain.

Hugo knew that he would be the Sorcerer someday. Now, that made him a Royal.

Varian knew he wasn’t Dorothy yet, and he never wanted to be. Now, that meant he was a Rebel.

Chapter End Notes

I FINALLY GET TO WRITE NURU!!! She's my favorite I love her!!! And I've missed writing Ruddiger and Olivia so much these past weeks. I adore them.

I forgot to drink water today and got a splitting headache, so don’t be like me and GO DRINK SOME WATER!!!

Kudos and comments are always welcome!

Domestic Life

Chapter Summary

Outside of the classroom, dorm life brings its own set of problems for Varian and Hugo.

Chapter Notes

Guess who got COVID! :D For real though, it's been bad bad bad but my strength is FINALLY returning! And on the bright side, quarantine gave me time to finish this chapter!

Hope y'all enjoy and stay healthy!!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

And so, the school year began to move forward. But boarding schools involve more than academics. When you live at school, the domestic side of life can cause just as many problems as quizzes and homework.

“I need coffee.”

Varian, already awake, grumbled as he finished getting dressed. He would have to get a cup at breakfast, although he already knew it wouldn't be any good. Castleteria coffee was as abysmal as the rest of the food.

Hugo yawned from across the room, waking from a surprisingly deep sleep. As he put on his glasses, he squinted at his dark haired young man.

“Are you really going to wear that?”

Varian whipped his head around.

Hugo continued. “I mean, nothing against the whole farm-boy look. It's your destiny and all, but that bandana of yours is definitely not your color.”

He's right about that. Varian thought, annoying himself.

“Well, that's your opinion,” he huffed.

Hugo got out of bed, stretching his arms. “Hey! It ain't an opinion to say that they don't even match your goggles, Goggles. They're lab equipment. You don't need to wear them in our room.”

“We live with lab equipment!”

“Yeah! But we’re not using it *now* .”

Varian rolled his eyes. “I’m heading to classes early, don’t wait up.”

“Sure. See you there, Freckles.” Hugo yawned.

Without another word (but definitely some glaring), Varian left the room.

Hugo took a swig of water from the bottle beside his bed, forcing a smile.

“Another morning in paradise.”

Hugo quickly summoned a light breeze with magic to push the smoke out of their dorm.

Varian coughed, shifting his goggles from his eyes and onto his head. His face was covered in dust, apart from the circles of skin where the goggles shielded him.

“Okay, so, good learning moment: flynnolium doesn’t react well with iron.”

“You think?!” Hugo shouted.

“I need to pace around.” Varian got up from his desk chair.

“Why?”

“Helps me think.”

“Whatever floats your boat.”

“...”

“What?”

“Are you going to move all the shit you have on the floor?” Varian gestured to the countless papers, beakers, and bolts.

“Nope,” Hugo said, from where he was laying on said floor. Ruddiger and Olivia had already made themselves comfortable on a nearby packet.

“Where did you get that? The castleteria closed for the night. It’s two AM.”

Hugo said nothing. He just chewed a little slower on his croissant before taking yet another bite.

“You stole it, didn’t you?”

“Guilty until proven innocent.”

Varian groaned.

“Hey don’t judge. One day you’ll want a late night snack and then you’ll need my resourcefulness, Goggles!”

“I’ll pour acid on you if you ever try to involve me in your two AM activities, Glasses.

“Promise?” Hugo fluttered his eyelashes at the shorter student.

“Sure, then I’ll cut off your ponytail afterwards,” Varian smirked.

“I’ll kill you and make it look like an accident.”

The two of them laughed bitterly.

Hugo was staring daggers at Varian.

The freckled young man simply ignored him; the tense silence occasionally broken by the repetitive sound of clipping.

Hugo took a deep breath.

“My dear roommate, am I wearing my glasses right now?”

Varian hummed questioningly, before finally looking at him. “Yes? Why?”

Hugo took a deep breath. “Oh, good. Guess that means my eyes are, in fact, working! And that I’m seeing toe nails on the floor.”

“Oh, yeah,” Varian said, clipping another nail. “Just basic health upkeep, Glasses.”

Hugo, in annoyance, called forth a broom with magic, handing it to Varian. “Clean it.”

Varian snorted. He *had* planned to clean up any nails on the floor once he was done, of course. He was a slob at times, but he wasn’t *that much* of a slob. But... this would be more fun.

“You’re the one holding the broom already.”

Hugo went red in the face.

Each dorm at Ever After High came with its own thermostat. Its effectiveness wasn’t always perfect. However, with a bit of magic amplification, its power could easily be increased. This was very helpful in the more extreme months, like summer and winter.

This was also helpful when someone needed to be plain old petty.

Needless to say, Hugo was glad to have already brought his winter coat to school. He was equally as glad that Varian did not.

“Oh? Having trouble studying?” Hugo asked innocently.

Varian, under a pile of blankets, fought to keep his teeth from chattering as he glared at him. He hated the cold, reminded him of when he was younger, of times he didn't like to remember.

More than that, though, Varian didn't like Hugo getting the upper hand.

Two can play at that game.

Growing up on a farm, you tend to get used to badly filtered buildings and overheating.

Consequently, Varian was virtually immune to the effects of hot weather. So, if an alchemical solution *accidentally* stuck the thermostat on a high temperature, it wasn't a problem for him.

His roommate was another story.

"Doing okay there, Glasses?"

Hugo, sweating buckets as he worked, forced a smile. "Peachy."

With utter glee, Varian noticed the annoyed little twitch in the blond's eye.

The thermostat was later broken beyond repair. But how? And by whose hand? Neither would say. Thankfully, for both their sakes, the temperature was turned back to normal before the dial was destroyed.

"I can't do it any more! I can't live with him!" Varian shouted.

Rapunzel looked up from her canvas. "It's barely been a week, Varian..."

"A suitable sample size for knowing how truly awful living with this guy has been."

The princess glanced back at her scenery. "What do you think?"

Varian sighed. "It's beautiful, as always."

"The bigger picture is always more beautiful. So, you should be focusing on that, rather than your 'small sample size.'"

Varian crossed his arms. He knew his friend was probably right. It was rare that she ever wasn't. Her advice was becoming as infuriating as it was insightful.

It's not that he wanted to hate Hugo. He just made it so easy to hate him! There was nothing to connect on! Everything that they did have in common was grounds for rivalry.

Besides, even with all that set aside, he was just a jerk. A sharp, stubborn jerk.

Rapunzel glanced for a long while at her friend as he went further into his own thoughts. She knew him well enough to know where his introspection usually led. He was as stubborn as he was smart, and he needed to get out of his own head. With a smile, she set down her paint brushes.

“You need to get off campus. We’re going shopping! I’ll have Eugene and Cassandra meet us in Bookend.”

Varian knew better than to argue, standing with a groan.

“Well, I guess I do need some new beakers.”

“What happened to the old ones?”

“Science. Science happened.”

In the valley below Ever After High, a village rested. This was the village of Book End, a thriving community as old as the school it surrounded. Although its population just barely reached a thousand, it was a thriving hub of goods and services, with countless wonderful stores littered throughout its brick, stone, and occasionally straw structures.

And Varian feared that Rapunzel’s goal was to bring him to all of them.

Rapunzel first made a bee-line for the local Yarns and Noble, a store that sold a variety of reading materials and knitting supplies. It appealed to both their interests after all! Rapunzel loved her crafts, and Varian loved his knowledge, and vice versa.

“Seriously Varian, knitting is just like alchemy! But with needles and yarn!”

“And no chemicals that can melt your face off?”

“And no chemicals that can melt your face off!”

Next, citing the need for more ‘color’ in both their dorms, Rapunzel directed them to the Enchanted Flower Shop. The bubbly blonde picked out several mini pots of daisies and tulips, all enchanted to be adorably small. Varian chose a particularly fascinating mini cactus with a blue tint to it.

“But Varian, you already have so much blue in your dorm,” his friend pointed out.

“True, but I don’t have a blue cactus yet!” He said, before accidentally pricking himself on one of its spikes.

Then, per the dark haired young man’s request, they stopped at the Glass Slipper shoe store to get him new boots. Unfortunately, his old ones had encountered some not-so-school-approved chemicals, so he needed new ones; preferably ones without still smoking holes in them.

The shop was run by Ashlynn Ella, daughter of Cinderella, a girl as kind as she was ambitious. How the princess managed to do her school work *and* run a business in the heart of Book End during the school year would forever be a mystery to Varian.

“Oh, you know, lots of coffee!” Ashlynn would respond. “And more than a few nature walks to ward off stress.”

Rapunzel spent the next half hour trading details on secret hiking paths with the future Cinerella.

After that, per the long haired young woman's request, they stopped at the Tower Hair Salon. Like her mother before her, Rapunzel Jr's hair naturally grew extremely fast. Consequently, this required her to get weekly haircuts to keep it in check. She enjoyed keeping it at ankle length in her magical hair elastics, though, so the session never took long.

When the cashier at the Tower saw the blonde enter the salon, she squealed, moving to embrace her.

"Rapunzel! Darling! I've missed you so much!"

"You too Auntie Willow!"

The Tower was also owned by Rapunzel's family. Go figure.

Since Rapunzel Sr. lived in her own castle away from Book End, management of the business was done by her younger sister, Willow. While she herself was never destined to be in the Rapunzel story, being the younger of the two siblings, she took pride in their family's story, and was genuinely passionate about running the business. She was certainly talented at it.

"Varian! Nice to see you. Love the highlight!" Willow remarked jovially.

"Thanks," Varian laughed, adjusting his dyed streak. *She says that every year.* Not that he was complaining.

"Well, what can I do for you two today?"

Rapunzel took the lead. "I'll be getting my weekly trim. And Varian— oh! Wait! Varian you should do something too! This is just what you need to relax!"

Varian frowned. "I think my hair is fine, length-wise."

"How about just a wash then?" Willow chimed in.

"Great idea Auntie!"

Varian sighed in defeat. "Sounds good."

Rapunzel beamed. "Trust me, this will hit the spot."

Varian sat in a chair next to her as the barbers worked her magic. By the time they were done, the two friends were completely and thoroughly relaxed.

With his eyes still closed, Varian spoke to his friend.

"You were right. I don't even remember what stress felt like," he said, content.

"Why do you ever doubt me?" Rapunzel said. "So, where do you want to go after this? It'll be my treat!"

"You really don't have to do that..."

"No, really! I insist! The next place we go, I'll get you whatever you want!"

Finally, they arrived at Varian's favorite vendure in Book End: the Lair-Essentials and Broom-Repair store; a mouthful of a name, so most just called it L.A.B.

Back at home, there wasn't a scientific, nor magical, supplies store for miles. But, here at Ever After High where the students created such a demand for it, there sat L.A.B. to fill the void.

Looking up at the sign, Rapunzel winced.

Varian grinned at her. "No take backs!" he teased.

The young man hopped around the store in a frenzy. He added item after item to his shopping basket, acting like a kid in a candy store.

He had just about found everything he had been looking for. All that was left to find was a new silicone beaker heater.

It should be just down this aisle...

"There it is!"

Upon hearing that voice, Varian grimaced. *And my day was going so well*. He thought to himself.

Standing right in front of the heaters was none other than the roommate Varian had been trying to forget about all day.

Hoping not to be spotted by the menace, Varian hid behind the rack of chemical safety shower curtains. If he was lucky, the blond didn't spot him.

But of course he wasn't that lucky enough.

"Boy, wonder what could be behind curtain number one?" Hugo stated in a mock-game show host voice as he pulled back the curtain. Seeing Varian, he let out a fake gasp.

"Freckles! Fancy seeing you here!"

Varian scowled, pushing the taller student out of the way as he stepped out into the open. "I thought we agreed to stay out of each other's ways outside of school?"

Hugo rolled his eyes. "Oh right, cause I'm here looking for *you specifically*. Totally not at the supplies store to buy, oh gosh, supplies?"

Varian put his hands on his hips. "And you do plan on *buying* what you're taking? Wouldn't want to steal anything, right, Glasses?"

Hugo's eyes flickered away.

"You're getting dangerously close to personal questions, Goggles," he said, only slightly humously.

Varian could tell he just touched a nerve. His original intention with the comment had been to hint to Hugo that he knew about his past, which Eugene had generously informed him of. But now, he began to wonder... how likely was it that that past wasn't over with. Maybe he could find out.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Varian continued to press.

Hugo looked back at him.

“I don’t love what you’re insinuating there,” his voice dropped in pitch.

Did he see me do a job? Hugo thinks frantically.

“And what am I insinuating?” Varian shot back.

Oh this guy is definitely still stealing.

Suddenly, a third voice appeared.

“Found everything you’re looking for?” Rapunzel asked as she turned the corner into the aisle. She looked between the two roommates.

“Am I interrupting something?”

Varian looked back at Hugo, only now noticing how close he and the blond were standing. He seemed to realize the same thing, since they both immediately jumped back.

“No,” Varian said, quickly. “Nothing at all. In fact, I do have everything I need. Let’s go.”

“Are you going to introduce me to your friend?” Rapunzel walked up to him.

Hugo raised an eyebrow at her. “You’ve already met me.”

Rapunzel pouted. “Still, it’s nice to be introduced.”

“Wait, you two met before?” Varian asked.

“Yes! We’re in the same session of da—”

“What are you, writing a book, Goggles? Make it a mystery.” Hugo cut her off.

Rapunzel’s look of surprise turned to one of smug understanding. As Varian looked at Hugo in confusion, the princess made a silent zipper motion against her lips at the other blond.

While she personally was not embarrassed to be in Damsel-in-Distressing class, she would respect if he was. To an extent.

Hugo put his hands on his hips. “Weren’t you two heading out now?”

Varian was about to respond with a resounding ‘yes’, but suddenly the other blonde jumped in.

“Actually, I was just about to ask Varian if he’d like our next stop to be for coffee! You should absolutely join us!”

“Rapunzel!” Varian hissed.

Hugo tapped his chin. “Temping, but I’ll pass,” he said, before walking away.

Rapunzel looked dejected. “Oh darn.” She turned to her friend. “Well then, on the way there how about I tell you about the class me and Hugo have together!”

Hugo never moved so fast in his life. “On second thought, I’d love to!”

“Yay!” Rapunzel clapped.

Varian was about to burst a blood vessel.

“Yay,” he gritted his teeth.

The Hocus Latte Café was a cozy little cornerstone of Book End. For the students especially, it was *the* place to get well made beverages, such as coffee. It was almost always full, but today it was positively packed.

“I haven’t seen Hocus this crowded since last winter during the blackout!” Rapunzel stated in amazement.

“I’ll say,” Varian scratched the back of his neck. He considered asking his friend if they could go somewhere else, away from the hordes of people, before he spotted a familiar face.

“Nuru!” The trio made their way towards the starry eyed student. “What’s going on?”

The dark skinned student was practically bouncing in place, her joy evident.

“See that jar over there?” Nuru excitedly pointed it out on the main counter, filled to the brim with coffee beans. Next to that was an open container full of slips of paper. “They’re letting people guess how many beans are in the jar. It’s so awesome! I love games like this so much!” She beamed.

“Is there a prize for guessing correctly?” Varian asked.

“Huh?” Nuru asked, before it chimed on her. “Oh, yeah. The staff says they’re getting a new coffee maker! It’s an upgrade, but since the old one still works they’re giving it away as the prize.”

“That’s spelltastic!” Rapunzel cheered.

“Seems awfully generous of them. What’s the catch?” Hugo placed a hand on his hip.

Nuru frowned at his skepticism. “Look around at all these people! Games like these bring in business. It more than makes up for itself.”

The friends exchanged an intrigued look.

Why drop \$100 bucks on a coffee maker when you can use some of those smarts you’ve got to get one for free!

They were going to need a table.

As they searched for one, Nuru whispered at Varian.

“Is that the jerk-face, your words not mine, roommate of yours?”

“Yes, yes he is.”

“Interesting,” Nuru said, but did not elaborate further.

They took the first open table they could find. From there they eyed the jar, occasionally getting up closer to it to take measurements (Nuru even brought a protractor! Which Hugo helplessly chuckled over), and wrote on napkins.

Eventually, Varian set down his pencil.

“Okay, I think I’ve got it.”

“Same here,” Hugo added.

Rapunzel gasped. “Wait!”

Both young men turned to her.

“You should say it at the same time!” Her optimistic logic being that if they both got the same answer, it would bring them together. “On the count of three!”

Hugo shot Varian a look. *This is just how she is, isn't she?*

Varian seemed to understand his thinking, and shrugged in response.

“1...2... 3!”

“431.”

“413.”

Hugo snickered. “Sounds like someone miscalculated.”

Varian pointed his pencil at him. “What makes you think *you’re* not the one who—”

As the two bickered, Rapunzel leaned over to Nuru. “What did your math say?”

Nuru smirked. “A good mathematician never reveals their answer.”

Rapunzel giggled.

Then, Nuru cleared her throat. “Well, I’ll be dropping off my guess now,” she said, to the boys. “Want me to bring yours up too?”

Varian smiled. “Thanks Nuru!”

Hugo slid his over. “Thanks.”

Nuru frowned. “I didn’t offer to you, but alright,” she said with sarcasm.

“Okay, Princess Protractor.”

The two stared at each other with clear dislike, but said nothing more.

Rapunzel stood. "I'll go up with you! I saw that they have chocolate hazelnut cookies and I'm dying to try one."

As the two walked away, Hugo muttered something about 'princesses' under his breath that Varian chose to ignore.

Varian tapped on the table, the silence beginning to bother him. After a while, and against his better judgment, the young man spoke.

"So, you been keeping up with the Royal Student Council elections?"

Hugo turned to him. "Yeah, kinda," he let out a breath. "I'm guessing you're voting for Maddie Hatter?"

Varian raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because she's the," he did air quotations for his next words. "Rebel candidate."

Varian chuckled. "Sure, but she's also *Maddie*. She's the sweetest person on Earth, but I'm not sure I trust her to be student council President. I'm voting for Apple, which I'm sure makes you happy, since she's a fellow Royal."

Hugo shivered. "Please stop calling me a 'Royal', Freckles."

Internally, the blond could acknowledge that the label, in the vacuum of school, was, *ugh*, *accurate*. HOWEVER, it still gave him the uncomfortable chills of resentment hearing it outloud.

"For your information, I'm voting for Maddie," Hugo said.

"Really?!" Varian exclaimed, genuinely surprised.

Hugo nodded.

"Dare I ask why?"

Hugo grinned like a Cheshire. "Cause she's not Royalty."

"Seems petty."

"Entirely my goal."

Varian laughed. *Of course*, he thought. "Why do you hate Royalty so much?"

Hugo visibly swallowed.

Varian watched him go deep into thought, with an expression of nostalgia and distress on his face. It left the shorter man perplexed. But as soon as it appeared it was gone.

"Let's just say that they ain't as good to their citizens as they should be. Especially those who aren't wealthy or well known."

Not well known? This guy grew up as the Sorcerer's Apprentice! Why would that bother him? Yes, it's wrong, but this guy doesn't seem like the type to have a bleeding heart for the downtrodden. So why...

Before Varian could question him further, Nuru and Rapunzel returned to the table with hazelnut cookies for everyone.

"We came here just in time!" Rapunzel remarked. "After we gave them our papers, they stopped accepting guesses."

Sure enough, by the time the group was done with their cookies, a worker behind the main counter shouted that they had determined a winner.

As the group made their way over to listen in, Hugo leaned into Varian's personal space.

"I promise to let you use the machine on weekends when I win."

Varian glared. "That's more generous than my offer will be when *I* win. I'll be charging you a fee."

The main employee took out a microphone. "Hello valued customers! We have gone through the many, many guesses you gave us and we have found a winner! At a whopping 426 coffee beans..."

"What?!" Both boys shouted in dismay.

"The winning guess was by Nuru Star!"

The starry eyed student practically leaped to the counter to accept her prize, overflowing with joy at her correct calculations. Taking out her Mirrorphone, she took a quick photo holding her slip with the correct guess, rather than the coffee maker she'd won.

The group clapped for her, but the boys were in a daze as they did so.

Nuru returned to the group barely holding the machine in her grasp, but smiling wide nonetheless.

Rapunzel returned her grin, immediately helping her hold her winnings. "Are you excited to start having fresh coffee right in your dorm room?"

"Well actually, I—"

"My guess was closer than yours, Glasses."

"So what?! We were both wrong!"

The roommates ignored how their friend frowned at them in annoyance.

"What were you going to say Nuru?" Rapunzel questioned.

Nuru made a face. "I'll get back to you on that."

Finally, Rapunzel interrupted the two. "Hey, it's been a long day. Let's all help Nuru get her coffee maker back to school and unwind, okay?"

“Fine,” the two stated simultaneously, both elbowing the other as they tried to leave quickly.

The two young women exchanged a look, sighing in exhaustion. Those two were hopeless.

The roommates’ argument had finally died out half way back to the school. From there, the two walked in relative silence, listening to the two young women converse, with Rapunzel stating how rarely she ever drank coffee in the first place. She just found the contest fun. Nuru seemed to understand her logic.

The young men kept sneaking glances at each other, though. Words right on the tip of their tongues. Great minds can’t be contained for very long though.

“I definitely should’ve considered the unused space,” Hugo quietly said, mostly to scold himself.

This got a small giggle out of Varian.

Hugo turned to him.

“What?” he asked defensively.

“I just,” Varian spitefully shoved down another giggle, “I was just thinking the exact same thing.”

Hugo huffed out a poorly disguised laugh. “Well, next time do better, farm boy.”

“Yeah, yeah, you too, your highness.”

For some reason, neither was as mad about the nicknames as they felt they should’ve been.

As they finally entered the school, Hugo grumbled, “We really should get a coffee maker though.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Varian groaned.

Hugo smirked. “Great, we agree! Then you’ll pay for it.”

“Excuse me?!” Varian went red with anger.

Rapunzel put a hand to her own face. *Two steps forward, one step back.*

Nuru, who’d been listening in, chuckled. “Alright, I had my fun. Which way is towards your dorm, guys?”

“Huh?” The roommates were confused.

“I’m doing a nice thing for you both. You can have the machine.”

“Wh– really?!” Varian exclaimed happily.

“Why?” Hugo was immediately suspicious.

Nuru shrugged. “I already have a better one in my room.”

“Then why do the contest?”

Nuru scoffed. “And waste an opportunity to show off my brains? You insult me! And don’t say you both won’t have done the same!”

“Fair.”

“Point taken.”

So, the machine was theirs! Sat on the table between their respective sides of the dorm, to make things fair. Although, it seemed that the machine was constantly being nudged closer to one side of the room or the other. But by who? Neither would say.

Both were silently thankful that at least this form of pettiness did not involve the room temperature.

Chapter End Notes

Hope y’all enjoyed! I figured you could all use a break from the classrooms: both within the story and (for some of you) in real life.

As always, remember to DRINK SOME WATER!!!!

Kudos and comments are always welcome!!! Have a wonderful day!

Heroes and Damsels

Chapter Summary

Hugo attends a special session of Damsel-In-Distressing class, and does not like it one bit.

Chapter Notes

I'M BACK!!! Thank you all for your patience! With winter break fast approaching, prepare yourselves for a ton of new content... full of fluff and angst :) Hope y'all enjoy this new (Hugo centric) chapter!!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

In Ever After, no two character types were more deeply ingrained into fairytales than the Hero and the Damsel.

Is it any wonder, then, that at Ever After High the most time-tested courses were Damsel-In-Distressing and Hero Training; Perfect for preparing the next generation of fairy tales, many of which were founded on the very principles of the heroic savior and the gracefully saved.

For begrudging roommates Varian Gale and Hugo Cast, however, these courses were nothing short of nightmarish.

Surely, nothing could make these courses more unbearable for the two of them.

Hugo didn't hate heights.

He really didn't.

However, standing in one of the school's many vast courtyards, looking up at the training towers, he was starting to feel ever so slightly *perturbed* by heights.

Or perhaps that perturbedness was due to the company.

For today, Damsel-in-Distressing, his least favorite class, would be working with Hero Training.

Yesterday, when the joint session was announced, Madam Maid Marian had explained that it would consist of two halves. The first half would be a standard tower rescue and retrieval assignment. The second half would be combat and championing.

Whatever that meant.

She had also mentioned that there were originally supposed to be three parts to the joint session, but that they were not able to get a dragon here on time. Not that Hugo was complaining about THAT. He was definitely grateful that his story did not involve dragons.

The professor gave some more details after that, but to be honest Hugo wasn't really listening. Generally, he ended up zoning-out during that class. He tried to pay attention, he really did, but it was just the WORST.

Donella had told him countless times to just *get over it* . Get over his pride, pay attention, and get through it already.

Easier said than done. Especially today.

The princesses in attendance were already aggravating enough, but adding a bunch more (mostly) royalty with hero-complexes made the already awful situation even worse.

Everyone else was excitedly talking with the additional students. Rapunzel, Hugo noticed, was frantically looking around the crowd beside him.

Guess she had some friends in the Hero Training course? Not that he was planning to ask her who.

It seemed Hugo was going to be alone in his misery.

Rapunzel nudged him. "What's making you so grumpy?"

"Guess." Hugo grit through his teeth.

At least no one he knew personally was here to witness my humiliation.

Suddenly, Rapunzel squealed. "Hi Varian!"

I jinxed myself. He thought.

Hugo moved as fast and as far away from the blonde as he could.

The blonde princesses noticed him leave, but said nothing.

Safe on the other side of the crowd, Hugo caught his breath.

Then, Professor Knight and Madam Maid Marian addressed the crowd.

"Hello students!" She beamed. "How wonderful it is to have all of you here today for this very special session of our classes!"

Professor Knight, standing in so much armor that not even his face was visible, spoke with an echo from behind his helmet. "Let's get things started then. You'll be paired up into groups of one hero per damsel."

As the professor began spouting off names, Hugo mentally bargained with himself.

Perhaps if I just stay over here, he won't notice me. Living with the brat was bad enough already. He really didn't need him knowing he was taking such a stupid course.

“Rapunzel O. and Varian G.” On the other side of the crowd, Hugo heard exclamations of joy from the other side of the crowd.

Maybe he'll think I'm another Hugo. He's probably dumb enough to do that. If Hugo did not fully believe that, he would never admit it to himself.

“Cassandra L.—”

Is it too late to call out sick? It was.

“—and Hugo C.”

“Hugo?!” A familiar, grating voice yelled. The crowd began to shift as a figure shoved his way through, right in Hugo’s direction.

The blond rolled his eyes.

Here we go.

When the goggle wearing menace finally appeared, his indignation was clear. “The hell are you doing here?” He pointed a finger at the blond. “You’re not in hero training!”

“Duh. Of course not. That’s for snobby princes and uptight huntsmen.”

Varian did not respond to the comment, instead he seemed to realize something. “So, you're damsel-in-distressing?”

Hugo went rigid for a second. “Unfortunately.”

For what felt like an eternity, but was only a few moments, he stood there waiting for the inevitable insults. And he knew they were coming. Goggles had a strange look on his face. Hugo couldn’t quite interpret it. At most, it was pity. Somehow, that felt worse than an insult.

But, before his roommate could say anything, another figure appeared.

“So, you’re Hugo C?” she stated. Hugo had seen her around before. She had short black hair with a round face, and an apparently perpetual hand on her hip. He remembered that she was at the same lunch table Varian usually sat at. Not that he paid attention to Varian’s life or anything.

Varian looked at his friend, then smirked to himself. “Oh, Cassandra. I don’t believe you’ve met my roommate yet! This is indeed Hugo Cast. He was just telling me some very interesting thoughts he had on the Hero Training course.”

Hugo scanned the woman before him. She had a sharp glint in her eye; quick, unyielding, and obvious to anyone with a brain. Since Hugo did, in fact, have a brain (despite the occasional doubts from Donella), something in his gut told him to stay quiet.

“No, don’t think I was saying much, Freckles. You should get your ears checked. All those lab explosions have probably done a number on you.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought—” Varian processed the insult. “Hey, wait just a minute!”

Before Varian could fully snap back at him, the professors called for everyone to get ready for the first half of class. The pair shot each other one final, mutual, glare of contempt before Hugo walked away.

Outside of his earshot, Cassandra spoke with Varian.

“Do you want me to kill that guy for you?”

Varian barked out a laugh, before he recognized the seriousness on the young woman’s face. “Oh, you are not joking.”

Cassandra was joking, but it was funnier to let her friend think she wasn’t.

“I think I’m good.” Varian sighed. “Ask me again before winter break.”

“Will do.”

With that, the two went their separate directions, one thrilled to show off her abilities, the other dreading the possibility of embarrassing himself. Not dis-similar to his roommate.

While the wind on his face was very calming, especially on a warm September day like this, Hugo found little joy in sitting in a tower. To be frank, he was bored out of his mind.

The training towers were not that tall, certainly not as tall at the school they attended. They were roughly three or four stories. About the length of a standard school bus. The “damsels” were assigned to sit in a room at the top of the towers, as their “heroes” did the difficult job of climbing up the building’s side. Of course, the school wasn’t about to totally endanger these future fairytale good guys. So, each of the hero students were given a harness to keep them from falling to the ground. Once the “heroes” reached the top of the tower, they were supposed to help the “damsel” escape, by bringing them safely to the ground. They were allowed to use the harnesses to do so, but were told they would be given a better grade if they found more creative solutions.

While that sounded at least moderately exciting in theory, for the heroes, in practice, it left the damsels with a very dull job.

“Oh save me, or whatever,” the blond said passively.

Cassandra groaned from where she was climbing up the tower, nearly to the top.

“Are you always this pleasant?” She shouted up at him.

“I could ask you the same thing, Miss. Lady.” Hugo called down.

The bob-cut girl shot him an icy cold glare.

Looking down at her, and consequently the ground below, Hugo swallowed.

For once, I’m glad I’m up here and not down there, climbing.

Choosing to ignore her, Hugo decided to turn his gaze to the tower next door, where Varian was slowly climbing.

The freckled faced student was clearly muttering to himself. If Hugo had to guess, it was probably a series of very un-hero-like words. Varian tended to rattle off both when he was extremely passionate about something, as the blond had seen in very rare moments in class, and when he was extremely angry, which was less rare in their dorm. Hugo didn't have a preference for either, but he did like to get a reaction out of him.

"How're you doing over there?" Hugo yelled to him with a smirk.

Startled, Varian very nearly lost his grip. Hugo felt his heart jump a little, before settling as the shorter man stabilized himself. The blond tried to brush off his own reaction, but quickly became distracted by the look on Varian's face.

"Fuck you!" Varian's voice cracked with anger.

"Love you too, roomie!" Hugo said with sweet-sounding sarcasm.

Varian seemed to have more to say. "This is harder than it looks, you know!"

Hugo could tell. "Well then, you should pay better attention," he shot back.

"Would you two quit it?!" From below, Cassandra scolded.

From the ground, Professor Knight's voice boomed through his helmet, and the mega-phone Madam Marian had brought for the day. "Heroes shouldn't yell at those in distress!" He yelled.

Madam Maid Marian grabbed the mega-phone from him and cleared her throat. "And to my darling damsels, please remember our lessons on proper etiquette during a rescue!"

Hugo almost considered shouting something obscene back. But then, Cassandra finally reached the window, looking utterly pissed off.

"Ugh, I just realized something."

Hugo raised an eyebrow at her.

"I think the Professors put us in a pair because we're the outliers."

"Outliers?"

Cass rolled her eyes. "A girl in the Hero's course, and a guy in the Damsel's class."

Hugo saw red. "Oh those fuckers." To calm down, or just morbidly distract himself, he sat on the window sill and let himself sulk while Cassandra regained her bearings.

From his vantage point, Hugo's eyes drifted back to the tower Varian was working on.

He saw Varian secure a metal hook to the outer edge of the tower's window. Then, Rapunzel wrapped her now loose hair around it before jumping down and out of the window.

Hugo's eyes widened. From how well those hair ties work, it was a surprise to see just how long her hair really was. If he had to guess, he would say her hair was twice the length of one of these training towers.

When she reached the bottom, her hair still on the hook, she gave a thumbs up to Varian. With a clearly smug look, Hair-Stripe then grabbed onto the hair and slid down it to the ground. When he reached it he pulled out the sword he'd been forced to carry, like everyone in Hero Training, and cut Rapunzel's hair, severing it from the long part of the hook.

While Professor Knight seemed impressed, Madam Maid Marian was freaking out over the princess' hair.

That little shit. Hugo almost would've respected the audacity of such a plan if it had been ANYONE ELSE doing it.

His thoughts were interrupted when Cassandra appeared next to him. She smiled at the scene happening below, and at the long strand of hair hanging from the adjacent tower, detached from Rapunzel's head.

"Clever. It'll grow back fast anyways." She stretched her arms. "Alright then, let's get you out of here and get this over with."

Hugo adjusted his glasses. "As much as I'd *love* to be carried down from this tower like any other damsel, might I suggest a different approach?" He pulled out his Chemythstry textbook from his backpack, and with it a small glass vial of dark green liquid. He recited a small spell from the book, which made the liquid glow brighter.

Then, he leaned out the window and emptied the vial's onto the ground below. A large green circle formed, which looked like jello.

"A trampoline spell. Pretty basic, but it should do the trick." He motioned to Cassandra. "Ladies first,"

She shot him an unimpressed look. Hugo coughed. "Well, someone has to be down there to catch me if I fall wrong." *And to test this spell in the first place.*

While Cass didn't exactly love this idea, it did beat having to lug this asshole down a whole-ass tower. So, with a deep breath and a mental note to actually kill this guy if she died doing this, Cassandra let herself fall out the window.

To her relief, the substance did cushion her fall! It bounced her back up for a moment, allowing her to land onto the surrounding ground unharmed and on her feet.

Hugo grinned at the successful concoction, and at not accidentally killing a fellow student. Then, without further ado, he readied himself to jump down too. As he looked down, he suddenly felt a tad dizzy. He adjusted his glasses, his vision strangely blurry.

Quickly fixing his ponytail, Hugo shook himself from his stupor. *Quit being a baby.* His internal voice spoke. *This is nothing. You've climbed up walls before, and fallen out of windows before. This is nothing. This is nothing. It's better than being carried and embarrassed. Just slid off this window sill and...*

And he was free falling.

And he HATED IT.

When the blond made contact with the magic green trampoline, he was so panicked that he didn't even think about trying to land on his feet. He shut his eyes, bracing for the impact. But, instead of a cold, hard ground, Hugo found himself caught up in warm, soft arms. He sighed, still not opening his eyes.

Guess now I have to thank Cassandra. I really hope Freckles didn't see—

In all honesty, Hugo would have preferred a broken neck on impact to what actually cushioned his fall. He opened his eyes to find not that all too familiar freckled face mere inches from his own.

"You good?" Varian asked, looking genuinely concerned, if a little awkward holding his roommate bridal style.

Hugo's brain went static with mortification.

Well, if he had to be embarrassed, so did this nerd.

"Aww, Goggles. You really do care."

The concern disappeared from the young man's face. "I could still drop you," Varian deadpanned.

Hugo's eyes narrowed at him. "You wouldn't."

Varian smirked. Abruptly, his arms disappeared from under Hugo and he fell with a painful thud.

"Oops. Sorry." He was definitely not sorry.

"Mr. Gale, I saw that!" Professor Knight exclaimed. "Expect it to lower your grade for today!"

"Worth it," Varian muttered, still smiling.

"Professor Knight is right. Damsels need to be handled with delicacy!"

Hugo's whole face felt red. Embarrassment turned to anger. "Fuck you, man."

"Etiquette, Mr. Cast," Madam Maid Marian chastised him. Then, the Professors ran to another tower. Always a new disaster happening.

"Etiquette, Mr. Cast," Varian said sing-songily, directed at the distant Professor as well as the blond before him.

Hugo, still fuming, stood to his full height. "Why were you even the one who caught me? You're not my assigned partner."

Finally, the two young women re-appeared.

"My bad. I got distracted," Cassandra answered.

"It was my fault!" Rapunzel pleaded. "I wanted to compare our haircuts! Mine's as short as her's now!"

Hugo examined her new hair. "And brown, somehow?"

"Magic hair." All three other students said, at the same time. Creepy.

Varian scratched the back of his neck. “I was checking out that substance you poured on the ground then you just came in flailing! I panicked!”

Hugo crossed his arms. “I was not flailing!”

“Yes, yes you were.” Cassandra added. The three of them laughed, seemingly at his expense.

The taller student balled his hands into fists; on his face, his brows furrowed and his jaw clenched. The shorter student noticed.

Internally, Hugo was stewing in his own misery. He kept thinking back, remembering Don’s constant talk of proving himself; of being useful above all else. And now here he was, being told not to be that. Even if it was only for one class, it made him feel awful. He did not need saving. He didn’t need anything anyone would give him for free.

“Hey,” a voice cut through his head. Varian wasn’t looking straight at him, but his expression was serious. “It’s okay to need help sometimes.”

“What?” Hugo sounded more accusatory than confused. “You know what, Freckles, I really don’t need your pity right now.”

Varian huffed, looking at the taller young man now. “I’m not– it’s just– I used to have some issues with that, so I bet taking damsel-in-distressing wouldn’t be fun for me so I thought...” He turned around. “Forget it.”

Before he could respond, Varian walked away, muttering “Why do I even try?”, leaving Hugo mentally questioning what prompted a conversation like that from the little jerk.

Whatever. It didn’t matter. He just had to get through the rest of this.

Once the last of the pairs were emptied of their damsels, and the Professors had double checked that no royal necks were broken, all the students were brought to a nearby training grounds. It was most often used by courses like Hero Training, Heroics 101, and occasionally the drama department.

First, Professor Knight spoke.

“The next activity will be one-on-one combat. Hero students will be graded on their abilities in the ring. Winning will get you a good grade, but losing does not mean you fail. Do your best and act with chivalry. No tricky.”

“And my dear damsels,” Madam Maid Marian added, while walking around passing out color coded ribbons to her students. “Will be assessed on their choice of champion and how supportive they are to them. Use these ribbons as tokens of favor.”

Hugo suppressed a groan, and maybe a little vomit. God, he hated this class. He hated this activity. He hated being treated like he couldn’t do anything. What was even the point of it? To essentially judge people based on superficial details? Great. Swell.

Hugo looked around at the people he despised. Mostly royalty, all awful. Most of them paired up immediately, including his partner from earlier. Rapunzel was busy tying a ribbon into Cassandra’s

dark bob-cut hair.

Hugo frowned, annoyed that his already limited options were now even more limited.

As embarrassing as this whole thing was, the idea of being the odd one out somehow seemed even worse.

Then, his eyes landed on Goggles, who was quite clearly without a partner.

Serves him right!

But, looking around one last time, he saw that he did not have many options for partners left. He could always go for one of these fancy looking students who hadn't paired up yet. He was well liked enough, one of them would say yes.

Despite himself, Hugo's mind returned to Varian's earlier words: "It's okay to need help sometimes."

He sighed. *Well... let's call it the best of a bad situation.*

Taking Donella's advice at swallowing his pride (for now), Hugo marched towards his roommate. When Varian finally noticed him, he gave him a look of confusion.

Trying to look casual, Hugo silently offered Varian his turquoise ribbon. At first, he didn't take it. Instead, Varian's confused expression grew more intense.

"You're picking me?" Varian narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

Hugo scoffed.

"To be clear," he started to say. "I'm only picking you because Princess Hair over there picked the scary lady I was paired with earlier."

Varian snorted. "Scary?"

"Just stating the facts," Hugo repressed a shiver, remembering his conversation with Rapunzel on the cliff.

Internally, Varian agreed with the description. Cass could for sure be scary, and Rapunzel could be terrifying. He still remembered the time in middle school when they couldn't find Pascal for a day. Still, he wasn't about to tell Hugo that.

Varian shook himself from his thoughts, his expression returning to perplexment.

"That still doesn't explain why you're picking me."

Hugo sighed, "Cause every other option is... how did I say it earlier?"

"Snobby princes and uptight huntsmen?"

"Yes! That!" Hugo laughed. "And you, by some miracle, don't fall into those categories. Your brand of awful is entirely your own."

Varian grit his teeth.

“So, consider us even, for earlier, I mean,” Hugo added quickly, immediately regretting his words.

Varian’s eyes went wide. Before he could say anything the blond assumed would be insulting, Hugo shoved the ribbon into the shorter student’s hands, almost crushing it. “Try not to embarrass me. If you get your ass kicked, it’ll make me look stupid for picking you.”

“Wow. Thanks for your utmost confidence in me, damsel-in-distress.” Varian deadpanned.

Hugo took it in stride. “You are very welcome, my knight in grimy armor.”

The freckled young man crossed his arms.

After that, Hugo took his place on the outskirts of the circle set up for this activity.

Varian nimbly tied the ribbon to his wrist before walking over to where the hero students were.

Hugo didn’t pay much attention to the matches. Although, he did pay attention when Cassandra’s turn came. Like Varian, she did not fall under Hugo’s list of “Most Annoying Types of People” (i.e. the rich), so he internally rooted for her.

After all, beating up the rich? Now *that* was a cause Hugo could get behind.

So, while the other onlookers winced as she brought down her prim and proper opponent, Hugo had to resist a cheer. Which he did, successfully.

In contrast, Rapunzel and Varian didn’t resist doing so.

“Go Cass!”

“Crush him!”

Nice. Hugo allowed himself to think in agreement.

Eventually, it was Varian’s turn. He faced off against some prince-y type Hugo had never met, but immediately disliked, as he did with all royalty.

Much to the blond’s shock, SHOCK I tell you (not.) Varian did not do very well. For the most part, he was uncoordinated and easy to knock down.

Then, something *interesting* happened.

While on the ground after a nasty hit, Varian’s hand disappeared into his pocket, emerging as a fist. Then, he swung his fist out at the prince’s legs, hitting him. For a brief moment, the standing student did not react. Then, he stumbled in pain, before falling down. Now, both of them were on the ground.

Hugo glanced around. The audience was definitely surprised by this maneuver, and its results, but no one seemed to question it. To the average on-looker, this looked like Varian simply tripped his opponent with a well placed punch.

But, for better or worse, Hugo was not average.

Logically, even if Varian was freakishly strong (which was actually true and Hugo would never understand how) he still shouldn't have had the momentum needed to push down his foe while he himself was down.

But dragon flakes would make anyone fall in shock.

Those things were hot enough to feel through the thickest fabric. They were also fast acting, as well as fast disappearing. Perfect for startling an adversary and gaining a moment to strike.

Hugo knew that from experience.

Varian was, surprisingly, smart enough to conceal the small vial in his fist. Thus, when he swung out to hit the other student's legs, he was able to quickly release the red, glitter-like substance onto his shoes.

Don had taught him to keep a vial on him during thefts. She taught him how to make the substance, and how to use it.

Apparently, somewhere along the way, Varian had learned that too.

Before anyone could blink, the dark haired student was up again, his opponent

Too bad he still sucked at fighting.

It only took one more kick to the ground to knock the wind out of him, resulting in a fair and square victory for the opposing royal prick.

With that, the joint session was over. The Professors gave some bullshit speech to the students about the importance of their stories and their roles, before finally, FINALLY, letting everyone leave.

As soon as he got the chance, Hugo made a bee-line for his roommate, much to his disdain.

"Not a word, Glasses," Varian said, still nursing his wounded pride.

"Oh, I have many words about this," Hugo hummed. "Most of those words are about that little trick you pulled with the dragon flakes."

Out of the corner of his eye, Hugo could see the shorter student tense up, his expression dead with cold panic. This was to be expected. After all, the farm boy was not destined to be a magic user of any kind. Outside of a classroom, Hugo could use all the magic he wanted. Freckles, on the other hand, could not. In class and for homework reasons was fine with administration, but certainly not in non-magic classes like Hero Training. Getting caught doing so, especially against a student of royalty, would be a serious offense.

Hugo imagined what that would entail for the dark haired student if he went to a Professor with this information. He would probably be kicked out of their mutual magic classes, maybe even the science ones too.

Well, good riddens! It would certainly make Hugo's life easier...

Right?

Or... would it be worse?

After all, if Varian was out of the magic classes, Hugo wouldn't get as many chances to compete with him. Sure, Varian would undoubtedly keep doing magic and alchemy and science in their room, where he wouldn't be caught, but it wouldn't be nearly as fun to best him there.

Hugo preferred an audience for his victories.

"Well," he said casually. "I would've done it differently. You definitely wasted the potential of that substance. It's not even worth telling anyone about."

Varian's face went slack, and it was like seeing a hurricane disappear, leaving only calm and peace in its place. Hugo remembered seeing that exact same expression on the short student's face when he'd caught the blond earlier. It was strangely captivating.

Then, the blond's full meaning hitting him, he gasped in offense. "I'll have you know that I thought through that move entirely! Considering my enemy's strengths, it was the best possible—" the dark haired young man went on rambling for a long while without allowing for interruption.

Hugo tried walking away, but the little shit was determined to keep talking.

Overall, maybe this joint session wasn't AS bad as it could have been. Hugo almost hoped these kinds of classes would happen again.

Almost.

Chapter End Notes

Hugo: "This class is a FUCKING NIGHTMARE!!!"

Also,

Varian: "You should be addicted to shutting the fuck up."

Hugo: "You wanna kiss me so bad it makes you look stupid."

Hope y'all enjoyed this chapter! Kudos and comments are always welcome! REMEMBER TO DRINK SOME WATER!!!!

Pet-astrophe

Chapter Summary

Pets go missing and it becomes everyone's problem.

Chapter Notes

HAPPY HOLIDAYS!!! TEN. CHAPTERS. This is the longest fic I have ever written, and it keeps getting longer! This is also the longest chapter I have ever written at over 8k words! I figured y'all deserve something nice for the end of the year, and for sticking with me for such a long while. Love you all!!! Hope y'all enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Watching as fire rained down on the observatory, causing the building to shake violently, Varian looked around at his friends, and up at Hugo, and marveled at how absolutely bonkers today had been.

Earlier that day

“Hey, have you seen Ruddiger?” Varian said, as he checked under his bed for the third time. He had also checked everywhere else in the room thrice, to no avail.

Hugo turned from where was sitting at his desk, staring at his disheveled roommate.

“Can’t say I have, Freckles. Maybe he finally ran off to join the freaky circus from whence he came.”

Varian’s expression was simultaneously unimpressed and deeply annoyed.

“A simple ‘no’ would have sufficed.”

Hugo scoffed. “In any case,” he said as he turned back to his desk. “Good luck finding your trash panda.”

Varian was about to say something not-nice to his roommate, when an abrupt knock came at the door. Swallowing his words, Varian stomped over to the frantically repeating sound.

“Yeah, yeah I hear you,” Varian opened the door, a bit surprised by who he saw. “Hey Cass, what’s ___”

“We have a code green.”

Varian went pale. “Oh no. How long has he been gone?”

“At least since this morning.”

“Oh boy,” Varian put a hand over his mouth.

Hugo raised an eyebrow from where he was staring at them. Despite his usual code of staying out of other people, especially Varian’s, business, today he was particularly bored and in need of something, anything, to occupy his mind.

“Code green?”

“Pascal,” Cass said with deadly seriousness. “Rapunzel’s pet. He’s missing.”

Nevermind. Boring again. Hugo thought, his expression remaining unbothered. “Wow, what a coincidence, Varian’s hairball pet is missing too.”

Varian glared at him. “Pascal is a chameleon, he doesn’t even have hair,” he tapped his own chin. “But yeah, it is a strange coincidence.”

Cass got a far off look in her eye. “Come to think of it, Owl has also been gone for a while too. He usually does his own thing at night, he’s an owl after all, but he’s always back by morning. Not today though.”

Varian shakes his head. “We should deal with Rapunzel first. Where is she now?”

“Last I saw she was headed to the Castleteria to put up missing pet posters.”

The two took off running after that.

Meanwhile, the still uninterested Hugo glanced at Olivia. A thought occurred to him, only for a moment, relating to last night’s job for Don.

He quickly shook it away, though. It was probably nothing.

As always, the Castleteria was crowded. Today, however, most of the people there weren’t even eating. It wasn’t just Rapunzel hunting down and spreading the word about a missing pet; it was dozens upon dozens of students!

But the loudest of these frantic voices was Rapunzel’s.

“If anyone has seen my chameleon, Pascal, please tell him to come home immediately!” Rapunzel spoke through a megaphone.

“How did she get that?!” Varian exclaimed.

Suddenly, Nuru emerged from the crowd. “That’s on me. She begged me to let her use the one that the Royal Student Council keeps in our supply closet.”

“Of course she did,” Cass muttered under her breath.

Over the noise, a shout was heard from the opposite end of the massive room. A chain of shouts followed, zigzagging through the crowd. Through the chaos it was hard for Varian to tell what exactly was causing it.

As the shouts reached Rapunzel, still standing atop a table, she gasped into her megaphone.
“Ruddiger?”

“Ruddiger?!” Varian rushed into the crowd.

“Ruddiger.” Cass groaned, because of course he would be starting trouble. She stormed through the crowd after her friend.

“Ruddiger!” Nuru smiled, running after the other two. Despite not having a pet herself, the starry eyed student adored Varian’s fuzzy lab partner. She certainly liked him more than she liked Varian’s actual roommate.

Today, however, Ruddiger was not himself. It was clear to everyone, including Varian.

For starters, he was blue.

“Buddy! There you are!” Varian exclaimed in relief, until he got a good look at the raccoon.
“Buddy?”

Sure, Varian’s favorite color was blue, but even this was extreme. His first thought was that the little guy got into some kind of blue paint. Wouldn’t be the first time, actually. However, from Ruddiger’s current behavior, it didn’t seem that simple.

This led to the next discovery about Ruddiger’s unusual behavior: He was acting scared of everything. Normally, Ruddiger bolted through crowds thoughtlessly, much to Varian’s chagrin. He could care less if people were around; his way or the highway! But now, he was jumping at every movement around him. His eyes were shaky. Even his fur appeared to be literally standing on end. Even when he saw Eugene and Lance, in the crowd, he acted as though he did not know them. That was all the observation Varian could mentally note before, without warning, Ruddiger bolted away again.

Thus revealed the final discovery about the miraculously blue, scaredy-cat raccoon: He was fast. Too fast.

“I got him,” Eugene dived for the raccoon. Under normal circumstances, he should have easily caught him. However, with his newfound, unnatural speed, he was gone from the spot before Lance got him.

“No you don’t,” Lance sighed.

Pushing through the crowd, Varian saw that Ruddiger was headed towards the Castelteria’s main entrance, right as Raven Queen and Apple White, holding her pet snow fox Gala, were walking in.

“Watch out!” Varian shouted.

Ruddiger managed to run straight into Raven’s feet, startling her into letting out a quick burst of purple magic from her hands. This did little to calm the raccoon, and also resulted in startling Gala

out of Apple's hands. The snow fox landed on the still panicked Ruddiger, which finally got Ruddiger to stop circling the young ladies' feet and run away.

At this point, Varian had finally reached them both. "You two okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm sorry if I scared your, uh, blue raccoon," Raven stuttered.

"That's correct," Varian tried to smile.

Apple picked up her pet snow fox. "Raven, you shouldn't be apologizing. You're evil!" She said with a dainty smile.

Varian glanced nervously between the two roommates, noticing the clearly intense facial response this drew from the gothically dressed student. Despite her reputation as the next Evil Queen, Varian did not think Raven the type to be "evil". For all the gothic silver and black she wore, as per the school's destiny-centric dress code, her personality seemed far from unpleasant.

"Apple," Raven began, sounding exhausted. "I'm not—"

"Poor little raccoon," the Princess cut her off, instead addressing Varian. "I do hope he's okay. I wonder if— Gala!" Her eyes went wide, as did Raven and Varian's when they saw that Gala's once snow white fur had inconspicuously turned blue.

Before any of them could react, Gala leaped out of the platinum blonde's arms like she was on fire and sprinted down the hall faster than any fox should be able to go, leaving dust in her wake.

"Gala! Come back!" Apple ran after her, as did Raven.

As Varian's mind moved a mile a minute while he stood there, his friends finally reached him through the chaotic crowd.

"What the hell was all that?!" Eugene yelled.

It was at this moment that the Ever After High staff finally showed up at the opposite entrance across the room. "What is the meaning of all this commotion?!"

The gang promptly made themselves scarce.

"I'm gonna go get Ruddiger's treats. They might calm him down when we find him!"

"I'm coming too!" One after the other his friends followed. Clearly, there was more to all these missing pets than initially met the eye.

Today, Hugo was enjoying some well earned peace and quiet by taking a quick nap. He had pulled off a job for Don last night, and the loss of sleep had been hitting him worse lately. As long as he made up the hours, he should be fine.

So, with his school work already done too, he was perfectly content to do nothing today.

At least, he *was* . Until the door slammed open.

“Hello people who do not live here. And Freckles,” he shot Varian a disingenuous grin. “Dare I ask why you are all here?”

“Going searching for Ruddiger. We saw him in the Castleteria acting strange,” Nuru explained.

Hugo’s interest suddenly peaked.

“I found the treats,” Varian pulled a bag from the top of his closet shelves.

Hugo ignored his roommate, attention firmly fixed on Nuru. “Wait, strange how?”

“He was spooked by just about everything and way faster than normal. Also, he was bright blue.”

Hugo frowned. “Sounds like magic to me.”

“You think?” Varian said, sarcastically.

Hugo scoffed. “And the treats are for, what, getting him to relax?”

“Yeah.”

“Geez, our clock must be broken. Cause I had no idea it was amateur hour.” Hugo sighed. “If it's magic you're dealing with, you're gonna have trouble finding him in the first place.”

Varian plopped the treats bag onto the table. “Well, what would you suggest, Mr. Sorcerer's Apprentice?”

Hugo grabbed his glasses from his desk and pulled himself off of his bed. He walked over to Varian’s side of the dorm room, knelt down to Ruddiger’s pet bed, and collected a few hairs in a bottle. Without stopping to explain himself to the group, Hugo pulled out a glowing substance from his desk and dropped the hairs into it. The substance then went dark.

“Tracking potion. Obviously.”

Varian went red. “I was gonna do that,” he lied.

“Uh huh,” Hugo nodded along, unimpressed. “Let’s just go,” he said as he walked out without waiting for the others.

Varian’s friends turned to him with mutual expressions of “seriously?”

Varian shrugged, returning the looks with a silent one of “might as well.” Although, his disdain was clear.

As they walked down the hall, the vial grew brighter and brighter; eventually leading the group to the Charmitorium, where it became clear from a series of scratching and chattering noises that Ruddiger was situated squarely at the top of one of the ceiling’s wooden beams.

Even from the balcony, options were limited on getting up there.

“Maybe I could climb up there,” Eugene offered.

Hugo barked out a laugh. “Uh huh, sure you could Pauper.”

Eugene whipped his head around to stare daggers at the blond young man.

Lance patted him on the back. “I’ve got an idea! Cassandra, you launch me up there and I’ll get the little guy.”

“I could do that,” Cass said.

“Nobody is being thrown up there!” Rapunzel smiled, loosening her hair. “I’ll get Ruddiger. If I can just,” with one big swing, she wrapped her hair just barely around the beam. Ruddiger jumped at the unexpected movement, scampering further up into the rafters, away from the hair and where Rapunzel could climb up and reach him.

“Shit.”

A beat of silence followed.

“I vote to have Cass launch me,” Lance chimed in.

“Okay if we’re launching you I’m going too,” Eugene joined in.

Cass’ lip curled as she cracked her knuckles. Rapunzel quickly intervened, though, and began rambling a sort of counter-argument against the plan.

Tuning them out, Varian sat in one of the audience chairs and writhed his hands.

“Oh buddy,” he muttered. He steeled himself, deciding not to lose more time on worrying. “Okay, we need some way to get up there, grab him, and…” the thought crossed the young man’s mind that a magic broom would be helpful right about now. They were fast and could get them high enough in the beams that Ruddiger couldn’t run any further up. Maybe a basket to get him in would prevent him from scratching anyone, or falling and hurting himself. Only issue was that he had not yet learned how to actually make a broom fly, though, not to mention—

“I can make a broom fly,” Hugo said, pulling Varian from his thoughts.

Varian made a choking noise. “How did you— I mean— I was just thinking—”

“You were muttering really, really loudly,” Hugo smirked.

Varian sputtered. “I was not!”

“You were, dearie,” Hugo laughed, which only pissed off the shorter student more.

Nuru, who had been studying the look of the beams, hummed. “Yeah, you were,” she turned to Hugo. “And you, don’t be fucking rude.”

Hugo’s face twisted slightly. Varian repressed a snort. The face almost would have been cute, on a less annoying, self-centered, sneaky, uncaring, and yeah you get it by now.

Varian grabbed Hugo’s wrist. “With me. Let’s get a broom or something we can find backstage and get this over with.”

The best they found was a mop.

“This should do the trick,” Hugo examined the object.

Varian gave Hugo the once over. His temper somewhat subsided, an irregularity struck him. “Why are you here?”

“What?”

“Why are you helping us out? Helping me?”

For a brief moment, Hugo looked like he may say something unexpected. It wasn’t anything in particular that told Varian that. It was simply his alchemist intuition.

But even that could be wrong.

“And miss out on an opportunity to show off and watch you flounder? Freckles, I thought you knew me by now!” Hugo feigned hurt. Varian immediately shoved him.

“Nevermind, just do what you do and let’s get my best friend back.”

“Your best friend is your raccoon? That’s sad.”

“Just for that, I’m gonna tell Olivia she’s not *your* best friend.”

Hugo smiled. “Applying to fill the position, Freckles?”

Varian shot him a dirty look. “You couldn’t pay me *enough* to do so, your Highness.”

“You’d be surprised,” Hugo said, distantly. “Everyone has a price.”

I do. Cyrus does. Don does. I doubt there are many exceptions to that rule. Hugo thought like a prayer. This was one of the core underlying principles Hugo was raised on. Not that he even consciously thought about it, though. Before Varian could think about questioning him, Hugo clapped his hands together and took a deep breath. “Alright, get over here.”

“Me?” Varian said, surprised. “What happened to ‘showing off?’”

Hugo rolled his eyes. “Well, I ain’t getting your rat for you.”

“Raccoon.”

“Rat for short,” Hugo continued. “And the spell works best if the person who’s doing the flying casts it.” Was that just a superstition he was raised on? Maybe. “Besides, I don’t react well to brooms and mops. An unavoidable side effect of my wonderful destiny.” Well, that *would* have been true, were he not adopted.

More importantly, he hated heights; although he would never admit that to himself.

Hugo shoved the mop into Varian’s hands. “Okay, here’s what you’re gonna do…” Despite not being trained formally with magic, Varian learned quickly. Within minutes, he had the mop floating off the ground, to Hugo’s annoyance.

“Everyone ready?” Varian yelled from the stage.

From the balcony, Rapunzel readied her hair to catch the raccoon should he fall. “Ready!”

From the seats below, Lance, Nuru, and Eugene all stood holding blankets and baskets, anything that could possibly hold a falling raccoon. “Ready!”

“Break a leg!” Hugo said from the stage, taking a little too much joy in saying to his roommate, who smiled spitefully before turning back to his mop.

Adjusting his alchemy-proof gloves for safe measure (experience had proven they were also raccoon scratch proof), Varian took off on the flying mop. Despite his own reservations on how difficult it should be for a rider to be able to stay balanced, he found himself getting the hang of it fast enough. Slowly, he navigated the beams above, eventually spotting that strange blue fur.

“Hey buddy,” he spoke softly. “I know you’re really scared right now, and clearly something weird is going on, but if you come over here maybe we can figure it out together.” The dark haired student dug into his pocket and pulled out one of Ruddiger’s favorite treats. He held it out in his rubber gloved hand. Slowly, but still too fast for any animal, Ruddiger appeared and cautiously sniffed the snack.

Sorry about this bud. Varian quickly grabbed his pet.

“Gotcha!” he cheered, immediately trying to descend safely towards his friends.

His victory was short lived, however, since Ruddiger was downright terrified and attempted to loosen Varian’s grip any way that he could. Berserk, he bit along the young man’s gloves until he finally hit skin. Startled by pain, Varian lost his balance on the mop and his hold on Ruddiger slipped.

“Shit!”

“I got him!” Eugene and Lance both shouted, not noticing each other closing in until they knocked into one another and lost their balance.

The last hope was Nuru, who mentally calculated where the raccoon would land and jumped to the spot just in time to scoop him into her blanket and, for added measure, get him into one of the boys’ baskets and slam the mesh lid shut.

Still standing on the stage, watching this chaotic series of events, Hugo clapped. “Bravo, encore!”

Still floating above, Varian scowled. Eyes returning to his friends, he sighed, knowing his buddy was safe.

Although, the noises coming from the basket holding him reminded the student that despite being safe, he was not yet sound.

From the balcony, Rapunzel shouted. “We should take him to someone who can help!”

Meanwhile, in the teachers lounge, the quiet was more than welcome.

“I must have given out twelve detentions in that Castleteria today,” Madam Baba Yaga rubbed her temple. “The chaos was out of control.”

“At least Milton isn’t here for this,” the administrators collectively groaned. Of all the weekends for the Headmaster to leave school property, of course it was this one.

“I hope those poor kids find their pets though,” Professor Mama Bear said.

“Hopefully. Still, it’s strange that all these students lost their pets at the same time,” Baba Yaga said into her coffee.

“Strange indeed.”

Then, a rapid knock came from the door. Professor Poppa Bear got up to answer it, opening the door only a smidge.

“Is Madam Yaga here?” Multiple voices sounded off at once, clear from within the lounge.

As Mama Bear stood up to join her husband at the door, Baba Yaga silently mouthed at Poppa Bear, “No. No. Tell them I’m not here.”

Unfortunately, Professor Mama Bear did not see her do this. She smiled at the students at the door. “Why yes, she is here!” She said, before moving her husband to let the students inside.

Baba Yaga groaned, taking one last swig of coffee.

Six students rushed inside. One of them, who she recognized as Varian Gale, the next Dorothy, was holding a basket in one arm, and a mop in another.

Suddenly, the basket jumped in the student’s grasp and fell to the floor. Its lid burst open, revealing a small, panicked, blue animal, who wasted no time running around the room, desperate for an escape.

“Ruddiger, no!” Varian screeched.

Acting fast, Madam Baba Yaga waved her hand and Ruddiger froze mid-sprint. Varian was audibly distressed by this. So, she clarified, “He’s in no pain. I’m just keeping him still. What on Earth is the matter with him?! And why is he blue?”

“That was something we were hoping you could tell us,” a student she didn’t recognize remarked.

Baba Yaga hummed. “Well then, let’s see.” Without warning, she picked up Ruddiger and took a single strand of fur from his head. Holding it between her fingers, she snapped her other hand and the tuff caught fire, leaving a smoke which seemed to move everywhere but up. Narrowing her eyes, Baba Yaga waved her hand and the smoke vanished.

“I do know this affliction. It comes from a potion, and a powerful one at that, which spreads easily through simple physical contact. The slightest brush is enough to cause the spread. It is only allowed within school premises because it is unable to affect humans and humanoid peoples, such as mermaids and—”

“And talking animals, such as myself and Poppa Bear,” Mama Bear added.

“Correct. However, it is concerning that this potion found its way into the pet population of the school. It may be allowed here, but the very few vials of it are always and only kept...”

Hugo went sheet white.

The previous night

As Hugo took what Don had ordered him to steal from the school’s magical and laboratory supplies room. Specifically, the beast-care-and-keeping section.

Although nothing in this particular area of the store room could negatively affect humans, since the magic components would only affect non-human animals, Hugo still found it to be a good idea to wear lab gloves, rather than his usual fingerless ones.

They did make it a bit awkward to subtly move around glass vials as quietly as possible.

A small squeak from the shelf at the other end of the row turned his head. Olivia was standing next to the exact substance he needed to find for Don.

What would I do without you, Liv? Hugo thought, grateful for his one and only friend.

Unfortunately, Olivia must have also been standing next to some electricity-in-a-bottle type substance, because when she leaned against it a tiny lightning bolt hit her, knocking her into the other vials and causing them, and her, to fall off the shelf.

Hugo gasped, diving to grab the falling robot mouse, hitting the ground as he did. With barely a moment to spare, she fell right into his gloved hands. The blond let out a deep sigh.

“What am I going to do with you, Liv,” Hugo feigned annoyance.

Suddenly, one of the glass vitals from the shelf, still spinning thanks to Olivia, finally fell off the edge, dumping its blue contents right onto the poor robotic mouse.

Scrambling to his feet, Hugo ran Olivia to the sink, running her under the faucet. She squeaked with delight at the surprise bath. The substance was certainly not the easiest to remove. He would have done more, and cleaned up the mess he left, but before he could the lights outside the store room began turning on.

Tucking her into his coat pocket, Hugo made a break for the window. Prying it open, he swung out it and yanked himself onto the vines on the outer wall. With some careful maneuvering, and a resistance to looking down, the blond managed to get to the ground safely and sprint back to the dorms.

Once he finally got there, shoving his coat under his bed and collapsing into the blankets, he had just enough energy to notice Olivia cuddling herself up next to Ruddiger; a habit she had only recently begun having. Usually, Hugo paid no mind to it; As long as she got herself to her charging station before totally running out, which she always did, and as long as she didn’t wake the raccoon up and make a ruckus, Hugo didn’t care.

But this time, the thought of that mysterious chemical that briefly covered Olivia crossed his mind.

“I’m sure that was nothing,” he managed to mutter before clocking out to sleep.

Now

Hugo’s mind was running wild.

I know it! I knew it! It wasn’t a coincidence that Ruddiger went missing! How could I have been so stupid! Of course the chemical was still present on Olivia when we got back to the room! It must have ended up causing a reaction when Olivia was in contact with Ruddiger! He probably reacted in the middle of the night and ran off! Either way, the other pets around the school definitely got infected too.

Almost unconscious, Hugo put a hand over his jacket pocket, where Olivia was chilling out. It was times like these where he was thankful she wasn’t a biological mouse. Rather, a robotic one. Just one of the numerous reasons to appreciate her everyday. But his mind drifted back to his worries before long.

Don is going to be furious! This is a major fuck-up. If they ever trace this back to Olivia, back to me? It could jeopardize everything! I’ve gotta stay low profile until this is over. No more helping! Especially not for the farmboy. No one can know what I know.

Meanwhile, Baba Yaga continued speaking, oblivious to her student’s stunned silence.

“I have a spell which will cleanse them of all magical anomalies. It works similar to a bath bomb. However, we’ll need ALL affected animals cleaned at the same time, or else a still spellbound animal could re-spread the affliction.”

“The observatory could fit all the pets!” Nuru chimed in. “It’s large enough and sturdy enough to prevent any from getting out.”

“Perfect,” the Madam said.

“Welp,” Rapunzel was rocking back and forth on the balls of her bare feet. “This has been enlightening, but we should probably get back to pet finding as soon as possible. Specifically my pet Pascal, pretty please?” She tried to sound assertive, but her worry seeped through. Eugene held her hand.

“Oh no,” Baba Yaga protested. “I won’t allow you to go around catching magically affected animals without assistance. I can barely comprehend how you all managed to find this one,” she gestured to the still frozen Ruddiger. “Follow me please,” she said before leading them to her office.

Once inside, she floated up to a higher shelf and found a green vial.

“This should help. It’s a—”

“Sticky compound for humanely catching animals!” Varian spoke so fast it was difficult to understand what he was saying. “We used to use that on the farm. I made it homemade!”

Madam Yaga raised an eyebrow. “Did you what now?” She said it like a warning.

Varian froze. *No magic outside of class. Right.* “I mean, I bought a homemade supply of it from a vendor.”

Hugo side eyed his roommate.

“Good,” Baba Yaga said, with little conviction. “Although, I use a more advanced version. It sticks to the subject but not to the ground, making it easy to carry the subject to where we need them. In this case, the Observatory. We’ll need quite a lot of it, which reminds me,” she held her chin in her hand. “Mr. Cast, you know this potion as well, correct?”

Hugo beamed with pride. “Yes, yes I do. My Mother taught me.”

“Perfect, you stay here with me and help make more. If we’re going to get all the affected pets in one place, we need to get them all there first.”

Internally, Hugo groaned. He really didn’t want to help any more than he already had, especially after realizing how all this started. But declining the teacher would raise more red flags than lower them.

Best to stay quiet.

“Since Mr. Gale and Ms. Star are already somewhat knowledgeable on magic thanks in part to my class, they’ll stay here and assist you.”

Nevermind on staying quiet. “That won’t be necessary, Madam Yaga,” Hugo interjected.

At the same time, Varian almost shoved the blond aside as he responded, “I’d be happy to help!”

“I’m fine with helping too,” Nuru spoke, paying Hugo no mind. “I don’t have a pet to search for and I know my chemicals well.” *And I can hopefully stop these two dolts from killing each other in front of a school administrator.* She thought.

“Perfect,” Baba Yaga turned away from them both. In doing so, she missed the look of cold rage from Hugo Cast directed at his roommate, as well as the look of smug satisfaction that was present on Varian Gale’s face.

Stepping aside, the teacher pulled out her own Mirrorphone and speed dialed someone. They answered almost immediately.

“Secretary Trollworth, it’s Baba. Please relay this message over the loudspeakers posthaste,” she asked before going through the wording with her.

A minute later, the school announcement speakers sounded off: ***“Attention all Ever After High students currently looking for a lost pet. Please report to Baba Yaga’s office for some MANDATORY magical assistance.”***

Pretty soon, the search was in full swing.

“Owl! I am not against parkour, but you are really testing my patience right now!”

Cassandra had found Owl circling shelves in the library. Maybe the tree trunks were appealing to the directly named pet bird. Or maybe he was high. That was what Cass had gathered from the conversation with Baba Yaga earlier. A school full of high, super-speedy animals. How fun. Especially when some of them could fly.

So, yeah, reaching him was getting difficult.

What ended up helping the most was that Cass wasn’t the only one with a flying pet. For once, she was glad that this school allowed the most ridiculous pets, like phoenixes.

Bumping into the myriad of unnaturally bright blue, extra long phoenix feathers mid-air, Owl finally slowed down enough to give the knight-like student a window to catch him in the sticky compound.

Giving the orb a toss, she finally got Owl in its grasp. Running to get under the bird, she managed to catch him in her arms before he hit the ground.

From the other side of the library, a voice shouted to her.

“Sorry my phoenix bumped into yours!” A strawberry blonde student said. She was dressed in pastel pinks and blues, and wore crystal glass pumps with vine like designs that reached up her calves. It was pretty easy to realize from there that the phoenix belonged to Ashlynn Ella, daughter of Cinderella. She was a bit of a student spellebrity, same as Apple White or Briar Beauty, since all three of them were destined to be the main characters of the Big Three Fairy Tales of the kingdom of Ever After: Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella.

“When this is over, I’ll buy him a nice toy mouse to play with,” Ashlynn added before running after her own pet.

Cassandra hummed, appeased enough by the kind offer. Even if Ashlynn was, to some, a very important person, it was nice to see it didn’t go entirely to her head.

Still, Cass wouldn’t put it past those types to only be superficially kind.

Owl acted only slightly appeased, and still very literally blue.

“Next!” Hugo called out as the next student approached. “Alright, what are you trying to find?”

“A cat,” Nina Thumbell said, twiddling her thumbs nervously.

“Big cat?”

“Sometimes,” Nina shrugged.

Varian grabbed the nearest vial, adjusting the goggles on his face. “We’ll need 10 milligrams for that.”

Hugo adjusted his own goggles. “For a cat? Sweetcheeks, be real. 5 milligrams should be fine.”

Varian scoffed. “Well, I think it's better to be safe than sorry.”

Hugo barked out a laugh. “Yeah, because you’re an expert on safety. Tell me this: are we at four mini explosions in our room, or is it five?”

“Hey!” Varian yelled. “I haven’t even set off the fire alarm yet! I know what I’m doing. Reminder: who exactly made this mop fly?” Varian grabbed the mop and carelessly waved it in Hugo’s face. The blond’s expression scrunched up in indignation.

As they continued to bicker, Nuru rubbed her temple. She shoved an orb of the sticky compound (which she used 15 milligrams of base substance for thank you very much) into Nina’s hands.

“Madam Yaga can make you a track potion over there.”

Nina shot her one last glance of sympathy and headed on her way.

Nuru quickly cleaned off her glittery dress and took a deep breath. “Next!”

Has Eugene ever mentioned how much he loves stables? He should do that more, cause it was thanks to the EAH stables that Maximus, the horse he begrudgingly had, was still safely inside.

Sure, he was blue and super duper spooked by everything and definitely trying to kick him into oblivion, but at least he wasn’t running around the school doing that to anyone else.

“Max, my guy, I know we’ve had our differences in the past, but could you please calm down for me?” Eugene almost begged.

He was met with a very loud neigh, and a hoof so close to his nose he could smell it.

“Yeah, didn't think so.”

After a few too many close calls, Eugene finally lured the unhinged horse to the spot he needed to be.

“Eugene! Move!” Lance yelled.

Without thinking, Eugene jumped out of the way, giving Lance a clear angle to throw the sticky whatever stuff the nerds had given them.

Not only did he get all four of his legs encased, but also seemed to calm him down enough through sheer curiosity of what just happened.

“We did it!” Lance yelled.

“Yeah we did!” Eugene yelled back. The two friends hugged each other tight, laughing to themselves.

Lance went quiet. “Uh, quick question, how are we moving old Max here to the Observatory?”

Eugene's smile dropped into a frown. He let out a long breath of air.

"Wheel barrel?"

"Wheel barrel."

The line was going so smoothly for a minute there, wasn't it?

Just as the alchemy trio was sending off another student with an orb of sticky compound, a blue squirrel came barreling through.

"Pesky!" A voice called after the animal.

"You can say that again," Hugo said as he grabbed one of the spare sticky orbs and threw it at the squirrel's path.

Direct hit!

The line collectively sighed with relief. A few students even said thank you.

Varian rolled his eyes. "He threw a ball. Get over it," he muttered to himself.

The student who shouted earlier finally caught up to his blue squirrel. The trio recognized him as Hunter Huntsman, the future huntsman in Snow White's story. Yes, that was his actual name.

"Persky!" He picked up the squirrel. "It seriously takes a bunch of slime to get you to slow down?! You're nuts."

The floppy haired future huntsman turned to the alchemists at work. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Hugo answered immediately, smirking with self-importance.

Varian groaned. "Seriously, don't mention it. Goes straight to his head."

Hugo turned towards the shorter student, somehow smiling even wider. "I'm sorry, who stopped the bushy tailed rat over there?"

"The same person who put spikes onto his goggles," Varian glared, almost smiling.

The blond pretended to look offended. "Jabs at my style! You monster!"

Hunter smiled. "Aww, she would love this. "

"Who's she?" Nuru asked casually as she worked. Hugo also raised an eyebrow at him.

"My girlfriend, Ash—" he froze, laughing uncomfortably. "Her name isn't important."

Varian could figure what that little slip up meant. Hunter Huntsman was probably dating someone outside his destiny.

Dating at Ever After High was, at times, strange. When many students had destined "true loves", dating before their story could feel pointless. Still, some with romantic destinies dated anyways.

The administration did not really care either way (a rare thing!), mostly wanting to stay out of the headache that was teenage romance. But many in the student body found students with future romances dating someone who wasn't their assumed "true love" to be scandalous. Well, high school is scandalous. Still, social rejection mattered to many, so most doing so just kept it quiet.

It was mostly thanks to Rapunzel's general disinterest in being accepted by other Royalty that led her and Eugene to be so open about their relationship. That, and Eugene's aggressive "that's my girlfriend!" energy." The dark haired young man had always admired them for that, on top of many other things.

"Anyways," Hunter pulled Varian out from his thoughts. "You two remind me of me and my girlfriend. We act like an old married couple for funsies too."

The roommates were both mortified and insulted.

The two of them both immediately thought something along the lines as: "I may be bi/gay, but I have standards!" as well as some general internal screams.

Nuru was just fighting not to laugh at their expressions.

Finally, Varian broke from his stupor and pointed a finger in Hunter's face. "You're deranged."

"Uh," Hunter couldn't really tell what he said wrong. Nuru, still holding back laughter, shooed him away with his still stuck squirrel.

Hugo quickly glanced at Varian. He had no idea what that guy was talking about.

"I know you're here Pascal," Rapunzel said sing-songily. "And I'm gonna find you!"

Under usual circumstances, hide and seek with the long-haired blonde was already stressful. Add a stress inducing, potent blue potion to the mix, and a princess who is unbelievably worried for her chameleon best friend, and you have yourself a very intense pseudo-game of hide and seek.

Rapunzel knew there were a number of places he could hide in this classroom. However, she also knew that in his panic, Pascal had definitely forgotten an important detail:

He currently couldn't turn any other color than blue.

"Gotcha!" She quickly wrapped a strand of her hair around the chameleon and lifted him in the air, Rapunzel beamed wider than she ever thought she had before.

"Pascal!" Rapunzel gushed, holding him, still stuck in her hair. "Don't you worry. We're gonna get back your multicolored-ness soon I promise!"

Hugo ran a hand through his hair, down from its usual ponytail, about ready to cry.

"Maddie, please, just tell me how much sticky compound you need," Hugo said into his hands.

“And we don’t need to know anything other than that! No tea recipes, no top hat maintenance rules, nothing!” Varian said. As much as Varian enjoyed his despair, the short student and even Nuru were getting tired of Maddie’s riddish.

“Oh certainly!” Maddie finally switched to a speech they could understand. “He’s a wonderful little dormouse! He’s usually in my hat, safe and sound,” she pouted, taking off and flipping over her hat to demonstrate, “but I haven’t found him yet today.”

Surprisingly, a gray, not at all blue rodent peaked out.

Maddie beamed so wide it looked painful. “Earl Grey! Oh aren’t you a silly billy!” She continued speaking to the mouse, half in English and half in Riddish as she skipped away.

Nuru sighed. “One less pet to worry about.”

Turns out, there were seemingly no more pets to worry about! The line was finished. Pretty soon, Baba Yaga called them to follow her with their pets to the Observatory.

Ruddiger was worse for wear. Varian hated seeing him like this. As much as he loved science and alchemy and magic and everything in between, he knew all too well how it could be used to hurt others.

Varian remembered when he first named Ruddiger. For a while, he was just the annoying raccoon that regularly tried to eat the pumpkins. Dad complained about him for weeks. That’s how his son decided to create his homemade version of the sticky compound. And it worked! But now he had to be the one interacting with the raccoon, since Dad didn’t want to be using any of his son’s “strange and dangerous” chemicals to neutralize it.

So, almost daily, Varian was around the little pest. Over time, the boy looked forward to seeing him every morning. He didn’t have many friends at home. In middle school, Rapunzel and Cassandra were the exception, (before he met Eugene and Lance in high school) but Raps lived far away during the summer, and Cass was always busy trying to work with her father. As sad as it sounded, he and the raccoon had an understanding. They were both annoying and getting in people’s way! Not really though, that’s just what people tended to say back then.

So Varian named him. Ruddiger, after a sad fairytale he had been reading about that week. It was a strategic decision. If he was going to convince Dad to let Ruddiger stay for good, he figured a traditional name would help.

To be expected, Dad’s first answer was a plain and simple ‘no’. It took a lot of bargaining to get through to him, but for better or worse Varian was no quitter. Quirin eventually said yes, but only under the condition that his son alone be the one to take care of the raccoon.

Back then, Varian was even more reckless with his alchemy. He was younger and stupider and not often given responsibility. So, when he found Ruddiger passed out on the floor with the chemicals he didn’t keep in high enough places spilt around him, Varian knew he had fucked up big time.

Ruddiger turned out okay. Dad brought them both to the vet. For all his talk of “taking care of that animal yourself”, he didn’t hesitate in cleaning up his son’s mess. His one parent was like that sometimes.

Ruddiger was okay, thank Oz. But Varian wouldn't ever forget how awful it was.

That wasn't the only incident with alchemy that Varian had ever caused, and not the last time he endangered someone he cared about, like with Dad. He could have died.

"Don't look so glum," Hugo said. Varian whipped his head around to look at the taller student. Hugo had his hands in his pockets, eyes towards the sky. His glasses were reflecting the sunlight, making his whole face glow.

Varian shook himself. "What?"

"The bath bomb will work. Your trash panda will be fine."

For once, Varian felt no need to retort Hugo's statement. For once, he hoped he was right.

He still rolled his eyes at the "trash panda" comment though.

They stared at the Observatory. All the pets were already inside, ready to be cleaned and brought back to normal.

At least, they hoped that was all of them.

Right on cue, Madam Baba Yaga addressed the mass of students who had brought their pets in need of help.

"Are there any pets unaccounted for?" She called into the crowd of students.

A hand donning a silver bracelet rose, and all the students around her moved aside. Not because they were forced, but because they simply realized she was there and became spooked.

Raven Queen stepped forward. "I still can't find Nevermore."

"And Nevermore is a crow?" Eugene sounded so hopeful when he asked. Considering the reference to the story of the Raven, it wouldn't be improbable. Varian had assumed the same thing when he heard the pet's name.

But the cringe in the goth-looking student's face suggested that they were way, way off.

Suddenly, a roar cracked from above. Everyone looked up and saw as a blue dragon broke out of a nearby cloud. At first the dragon was large, then small, then somewhere in between, and back again. Most terrifyingly, through all of these changes, was the fire shooting out of her mouth, aiming at every cloud she could see.

She wasn't attacking the crowd yet, but they had no guarantee that she wouldn't.

"I think I can calm her down with magic," Raven shouted above the noise, as the other students took cover. "Someone just needs to get me up to her!"

Without a second thought, Varian went to get on his mop. Just as he was about to take off flying, a hand wrapped around his upper arm.

Hugo stared at him, then at the dragon, then back at him again. For a brief moment in the blond's head, there was a blank space. Even he didn't know why he just did what he did.

Finally, he spoke. “Magic outside of the classroom, Goggles? Are you trying to get into trouble?!”

Varian was ready to burst a blood vessel. “Asshole this is not the time for—!”

Hugo shook his head. “Stay down here and get the Observatory ready to include that fire breathing lizard! I’ll do what I can from the air.”

Varian stared up at Nevermore and back down at the crowd. Madam Baba Yaga was directing students to a safe place. She didn’t have time to deal with the dragon yet, and the more time they wasted the more things could go wrong and fast.

Being an aspiring alchemist, Varian was used to putting out fires.

“Fine,” he jumped off the mop and shoved it at Hugo. “Don’t die up there. Your ghost will haunt me.”

Hugo didn’t even retort that.

“Hold up,” Varian spoke aloud. “I thought you said mops and brooms don’t react well to you!”

Hugo winced. “Yeah, but I didn’t do the spell, so hopefully we’ll be fine.”

What? Varian thought, trying to find the logic in such logic. *Wait.* Despite his panic, and the blood pumping in his ears, Varian sounded completely calm as he spoke.

“You’re just afraid of heights aren’t you?”

“Uh,” Hugo jumped onto the flying object. “No time, gotta move **BYE!**” He rattled off before launching into the crowd, where Raven Queen quickly joined him on the mop.

Hugo spared a glance at the ground below. He swallowed back the bile rising in his throat, and moved his mind to the task at hand. Despite the fantastic circumstances, it wasn’t really anything new to him.

Being a future sorcerer, Hugo was used to putting out fires.

“Nevermore!” Raven yelled, stress clear in her tone. “I know you’re confused right now, but you have to stop!”

The dragon responded to this with a blast of fire that came too close for comfort. In the same breath, she disappeared back into the clouds. She couldn’t seem to decide on fight or flight.

For their sakes, the lanky student hoped she chose the latter.

Hugo suddenly smelled what he thought was smoke behind him. He turned around, expecting the end of the mop to be aflame, or worse. Instead, he saw no red fire. Only purple, in the hands of the gothic student. She didn’t even notice. Her eyes were still fixed on the clouds, searching for Nevermore.

“Hey,” he started to say.

Without warning the dragon reappeared, jagged mouth hanging open, alight with fire and facing straight towards the two students.

Hugo knew he didn't have time to move them and the mop away.

Out of the corner of his eye, Raven's purple flaming hands rose.

"Stop!"

A blast of purple hit the dragon, surrounding her entirely. She was completely frozen.

Then, wings frozen with the rest of her, she fell.

"Nevermore!" Raven screamed. She shook Hugo as she commanded him, "Get me down to her!"

Hugo directed the mop down and tried to catch up fast. He could see Varian and the others on the ground, panic clear on their distant faces. The dark haired student, with that bright blue streak in his hair, was standing by the Observatory, seemingly ready for whatever came next.

They weren't going to make it in time. Somehow, that made Hugo's stomach drop more than the heights he was seeing did.

Then, inches before she hit the ground, Nevermore was stopped.

Madam Baba Yaga, hands outstretched towards the dragon, let out the smallest breath.

Without wasting any more time, Baba Yaga levitated the still frozen dragon into the Observatory, where Varian quickly threw the magical bath bomb inside and re-shut the door.

From outside, they could hear a muffled BOOM, followed by a flood of bubbles that leaked under the giant observatory doors, followed by silence.

Finally, Hugo and Raven reached the ground.

Raven sprinted off the mop and towards the doors.

"Get this open now!" She yelled, and no one was eager to argue. Kindness suited her best, but extremes were what people expected of her.

Varian and the others looked to Baba Yaga, who checked the seconds hand on her watch for a moment, before nodding. Opening the doors, right up front, back to her deeply purple self and small as a puppy, was Raven's pet dragon.

"Nevermore!" All traces of the power Raven commanded moments ago were gone, replaced with pure relief and love.

The other students awaiting their pets all rushed forward. For Varian, Cassandra, and Rapunzel, all of their smaller pets were seated on Maximus.

Eugene gave the horse a quick pat. "You are getting all the apples I can find."

"Pascal!" Rapunzel bolted forward, holding her hands out for him to crawl into. Pascal was changing through all the colors imaginable, thrilled to be able to do so once again. There were happy tears in the blonde princess' eyes.

“Owl,” Cassandra held out her arm and Owl came to rest on it with a quiet hoot. “Good owl, Owl,” she hummed.

Without a word, Varian scooped Ruddiger off Maximus and into a big, loving hug. Ruddiger chittered and purred contently.

“Looks like all of them are okay,” Varian sighed.

Nuru stared at the observatory. “But at what cost,” she said, heartbroken. Inside, the building was full of bubbles, and outside it had fire damage thanks to Nevermore. Nuru was close to tears.

Varian sympathetically patted her on the back.

Hugo walked up to one of its crumbling walls. From out the Observatory doors, a single, small animal scurried out.

“Hi Olivia,” he whispered, smiling down at the squeaky clean robot mouse as she ran up his leg and into his hand. *Let’s hope the bath did the trick in cleaning you of that shit too.* He thought. *And none of this gets traced back to us.*

Hugo glanced back at his roommate and his roommate’s friend, “Oh come on, the damage isn’t that bad. A little paint, a quick spray air freshener, it’ll be good as new!”

Varian glared at him, readying a sharp return comment. But the Universe beat him to the punch, since before he could respond a piece of the wall fell, landing directly on Hugo’s foot.

One strenuous trip to the nurse’s office later, Hugo was situated with a magic cast.

“This is what I get for being the best,” he complained.

“Relax, it’s magic, so you’ll heal up in a few days tops,” Varian rolled his eyes.

From outside the nurse’s room, the rest of the group waited, and pondered the day.

“Can we do something normal soon?” Eugene complained. “Something non-magical, not chaotic, just simple plain old normal.”

“Yes,” the others said simultaneously, exhaustion obvious.

“Sure,” Varian added, walking out of the office. “Right after I get my best buddy here a snack.”

Ruddiger chirped excitedly at his feet before running ahead at his usual speed, without a care in the world.

Chapter End Notes

No animals were harmed in the making of this chapter. Kudos and comments are more than welcome! Remember to take some time for yourself, make a good new year’s resolution, and as always DRINK SOME WATER!!! Muah!

What Friends Are For

Chapter Summary

Seeing Nuru so upset over the Observatory being under reconstruction, Varian enlists the help of his friends in making her day better! Meanwhile, she and Hugo spend some time together.

Chapter Notes

Happy almost-Spring everyone! It sure doesn't feel like it yet, but give it time. The warm breeze will be here before we know it. Hope y'all enjoy this new chapter!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Something felt... off in Magicology today.

At first, Varian couldn't put his finger on it.

Granted, he was a bit distracted.

"You're doing it wrong," Varian kicked his roommate under the table, just above the cast on his foot.

Hugo acted unphased as he continued his in-class assignment. "Like you would know, Goggles," he said, kicking back with his good foot.

Things between them had been, well, same as always. Whatever sense of generosity had possessed him to help during the recent pet-astrophe had vanished into thin air. Not that Varian was expecting anything to change. On top of that, to the freckled student's shock (SHOCK I TELL YOU) injured Hugo had been just as insufferable as not-injured Hugo.

Lucky Varian.

As for Hugo, the cast on his foot couldn't come off fast enough. Don had flipped her lid when she found out about his little boo-boo. Being on crutches meant Hugo couldn't do any jobs for her for a while. Thankfully, she didn't know about how he'd gotten it: helping Varian and his friends. Nor did she know that it was Hugo's own carelessness that caused the whole pet situation in the first place! Just thinking about that made him want to shrink into nothingness. Luckily, no one had figured that out.

If Hugo was especially lucky, she wouldn't ever know.

"Quiet class!" Madam Baba Yaga shouted. "Now, while you work, who can tell me the most common purpose of this spell?"

Both roommates raised their hands.

Madam Yaga hummed. “Someone other than Mr. Cast or Mr. Gale, please?”

The two of them simultaneously grimaced. Maybe they’d been getting out of hand today.

To make things brighter. The answer to the question was the spell makes things brighter. Anything from gems to stars in the sky.

Nuru’s got this one. Varian thought.

Then, it hit him; exactly what felt off.

Nuru hadn’t spoken at all during class today.

Varian turned to where she was sitting, across the room. She was staring out a window, looking entirely deflated. For someone who usually shone so bright, it was a jarring sight to see. Even more jarring was that Varian hadn’t noticed it all this time. He wanted to blame Hugo, but that felt like a poor excuse.

The rest of class, he continued to glance over at Nuru. Her state of sadness seemed to only worsen.

After class, he made a beeline for her.

“Hey, are you okay? You were really quiet. You didn’t even answer when Baba Yaga asked about the stars spell. You love stars!”

“I do. I do love stars, and comets, and planets, and space. That’s the issue.” Nuru grew melancholy. “There’s this astronomical event happening tonight. From our point of view, it will look like two planets are overlapping!”

“That sounds awesome!” Varian exclaimed, but bit his tongue seeing Nuru’s sadness grow more apparent.

“Yeah, it will be. I’d been planning to view it using the school’s Observatory’s massive telescope, like I would at my family’s Observatory back home. But it’s still under reconstruction.”

“Oh. Oh no,” Varian said, dejected. “Maybe if we got everyone together, and helped with the clean up, we could get it done in time!” He bargained.

Nuru frowned. “I already asked the Headmaster about that. No students are allowed near it until the ‘professionals’ get it done. Plus, he’s royally pissed that the crisis was dealt with before he even heard about it.”

“Sounds about right,” Varian grumbled, before his gaze turned sympathetic. “Still, I’m really sorry Nuru.”

“It’s okay,” Nuru paused. “Besides, missing the event isn’t what’s bothered me most. I was mostly just looking forward to using the Observatory at all this week. My family has one just like it, but they’re back home and I’m here. At school.”

Varian went silent, suddenly understanding precisely what the real issue was.

Then, his friend put on a convincing smile. “Anyways, enough about that. We should be getting to lunch!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Varian followed her towards the Castleteria. As they walked, his mind put the pieces together.

Nuru was homesick.

Homesickness was a feeling which Varian had some experience with.

Following all their daily classes, Varian and Hugo both returned to their shared living space.

“God,” Hugo groaned, setting down his crutches and glasses, before promptly flopping onto his bed. “This cast is now my mortal enemy. Sorry, Freckles, you’ve been replaced.”

“You’re being a baby,” Varian said, as he set down his bag.

The blond lifted his head from the pillow. “I never took you as one to insult the sick and injured.”

“You aren’t sick.”

“Sick of you.”

“Oh ha ha,” Varian deadpanned. “Asshole.”

“Little shit,” Hugo responded, sing-songily, but with no joy in his tone.

Varian exhaled angrily as he unpacked his books.

As silence enveloped the room, the shorter student’s mind returned to his friend, Nuru. Homesickness wasn’t a fun feeling. He knew that for sure.

When Varian was very little, he had been homeschooled too. That was back when Mom was around, and she was quite the teacher. She made everything fun, especially science, magic, and alchemy. “The big three!” she had called them.

Unconsciously, Varian fiddled with the old goggles sitting atop his head.

It was definitely an adjustment when he first went to public school for the first time. Despite being more than a little happy to get away from the farm, even if only for a few hours a day, he still missed his family: Auntie Adira, Uncle Hector, even Dad. It was a new, tough feeling to grapple with.

In the end, he had some great friends, Rapunzel and Cassandra, who helped him to get through that. They helped him to love learning again.

Maybe, it was his turn to pay it forward.

Varian already had a brilliant idea.

“You want us to get everything on this list?”

“Yes,” Varian nodded.

After he had texted his friends to meet him in the Castleteria to discuss a “TIME SENSITIVE EMERGENCY”, they had all come running. They were... a little upset to find out there was no actual emergency (and Eugene made him swear to never scare him like that again), but they were still willing to hear him out on this idea.

“I would do it all myself, but I’m hoping if we work together it’ll go faster. Nuru is gonna be bummed out tonight, so the sooner the better to surprise her with this.”

Rapunzel gave his shoulders a squeeze. “Well I think it’s a great idea. She’ll love it!”

“If we can get all these ingredients in time,” Cassandra said, checking the list Varian had written out for them.

“And,” Lance added, ruffling Varian’s hair around his goggles. “If you can make it fast enough.”

The shorter student huffed, re-adjusting his gear. “My alchemical skills will not be an issue. And yes, we will get this done in time. I wouldn’t be asking y’all if I thought you couldn’t do it.” He clapped his hands together. “So, who’s doing the dark forest supply run?”

An echo of “not-it” resounded from the group. The last to call out were Lance and Cassandra.

“Great!” Varian said, already moving forward. “Lance and Cass will get everything needed there, while Eugene and Rapunzel search the Enchanted Forest.”

“What about you?”

Nuru had lost track of how many times she had recalibrated her telescope. As soon as she had returned to her room after the day’s classes, she had set about the task. It did a good job of keeping her thoughts distracted for the first ten times she did it.

Now it was just getting pointless.

No matter how precisely she set it to show the images it saw, it was not an Observatory.

Neither was this room. Even with all the space-themed decorations she had brought with her, none of them had that warm and cozy feeling of home. She did still love them all, though, from her galaxy print curtains, to her hanging planet ornaments, and even her old-fashioned glow in the dark star stickers (only a few of them though), Nuru was truly living up to her future destiny in the Twinkle Twinkle Little Star rhyme.

Hers wasn’t a big fancy destiny, but it was part of her and she loved it. Although, she still was not used to being called a ‘Royal’, now that that word meant someone who wanted to follow their destiny. Sure, people often called her “Practically-a-Princess”, in ways both nice and not, but ‘Royal’ felt a little stifling.

Just one of the many strange things about this school.

Nuru had been fortunate enough to get a room for herself. Her parents, dotting as they were, convinced Grimm that a room alone would help with her adjustment from homeschool to boarding school life. Jury was still out on whether or not it actually was helping.

The starry eyed student sighed, moving her telescope away from the window.

A knock rattled at her door. Sluggishly, she made her way over and opened it, happier when she saw who it was.

“Hey Varian! What’s going on?”

“Nuru! I’ve been thinking—”

“Oh, may the Universe help us all,” she laughed, gesturing for him to come inside.

“Why does everyone keep reacting like that,” Varian muttered, shaking his head. “Anywho, I know you’re having a rough day, so I was wondering if you would like to hang out?”

Nuru sighed. “Thanks, but I don’t think I’m in the mood for anything fun right now.”

Varian’s expression dropped. “Oh, okay, well if you need anything then—”

“Wait!” Nuru thought of something that lit up her eyes. “There is actually something that would make me feel better.”

“What?”

“Can I borrow Ruddiger for the day?”

Varian smiled, then suddenly grimaced. Firstly, for Varian’s plan to work, he would need Nuru out of her room later.

Secondly...

“Normally, I would let you, but Ruddiger is kinda in a mood right now. I think he’s still a little frazzled by the situation with the blue potion. He is pretty much determined not to leave my room. I’m worried if we try and bring him to yours he’ll scratch up your things.”

Nuru tapped her chin. Then, she beamed. “Then I can just go to your room!”

“And be subjected to time spent with Hugo? I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Varian said, mostly serious.

“Oh please, I can handle one annoying roommate. Besides, he’s practically bed-ridden; you said so yourself.”

Varian was about to argue back, when his mirrorphone suddenly buzzed. Nuru didn’t see what the hex said, but from the look on his face it wasn’t good.

“What would they do without me,” Varian muttered, before addressing Nuru. “Bad news, I have something urgent to handle, but we can hang out when I’m back! Until then, Ruddiger will be a great emotional support animal,” he laughed. “I know from experience!”

“I can believe it, he is adorable,” Nuru smiled. “Good luck on your emergency!”

“Thanks!” Varian took off running down the hall. *I’ll definitely need luck on my side in the Dark Forest. Hopefully Lance and Cass aren’t in too much trouble when I get there.*

Hugo was having a nice, quiet afternoon when his door was rudely opened, and a familiar, not-quite friendly, face entered.

“Oh good, one of Goggles’ friends,” he said. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

The starry-eyed student simply ignored him, before she turned her attention to finding the resident raccoon.

“Ruddiger? Where are you little guy?”

No response.

Nuru giggled, shuffling through her bag. “I brought you an apple.”

On cue, the raccoon burst out from under Varian’s bed. As soon as he registered who was calling him, he excitedly circled her feet awaiting pats. After a quick scratch around his ears, Nuru picked him up and sat herself on the empty bed with Ruddiger in her lap. While there, she handed him the apple, which he chirped over happily.

Ruddiger is indeed great for emotional distress . Nuru thought to herself. *I’m feeling better already!* She was sure she was making baby faces at the raccoon now.

From across the room, the taller student chuckled.

Nuru frowned. Hugo noticed, looking up from his paper.

“You don’t like me very much, do you?” he questioned with obviously false sadness.

“Not particularly.”

“Duly noted.”

Nuru raised an eyebrow. “No return comment?”

Hugo scoffed. “Hate to disappoint, Ms. Practically-a-Princess, but I have no opinion of you. You don’t even cross my mind. My brilliant brain is better spent on other things.”

Nuru simply glared at him, not dignifying him with a response.

Rapunzel and Eugene stared down the cliff with varying degrees of eagerness.

“According to Varian,” Rapunzel said. “The flowers needed for the solution only grow on cliff sides. Do you see any?”

Eugene shifted closer to the edge. Obviously too close, as his foot slipped. The Pauper yelled as he started to fall, but gravity quickly stopped in its place, leaving him dangling. He looked over to see that his girlfriend had caught him in the nick of time using her hair. With another tug, she pulled him back to solid ground.

“Thanks sunshine.”

Rapunzel laughed, kissing him on the cheek. “You’re welcome.”

Eugene grinned dorkily. Punzie always brought light to the worst circumstances.

He glanced back down the cliff. The flowers were definitely there.

“Okay, let’s think about this. As fun as it might be to throw ourselves down a cliff for some alchemy ingredients, do we really have to get this part?” He turned, pacing as he spoke. “I’m sure Varian would rather we be *alive* and not get it than—”

Eugene turned back around just in time to watch Rapunzel throw herself down the cliff, using her hair as a source of safety.

“I—” he cracked a smile. “Wait up!” He yelled after her.

Before joining her in climbing down the cliff, Eugene muttered to himself, “Let’s hope the others are doing better than us.”

“Okay,” Cassandra whispered. “From this point forward, we are silent. Not quiet. Silent.”

The other two nodded frantically.

Cass then motioned for them to move slowly towards the sleeping fireflies.

Normal fireflies would never have caused this group, let alone Cassandra, any sort of concern. But these were not normal fireflies.

They put extra emphasis on the “fire” in their name.

They could cause real fires.

But the slimy glowing substance they created while sleeping was very much necessary for Varian’s plan.

Jars in hands, the trio each crept up to a separate firefly to scoop up what they could.

The alchemist, however, had a little too much experience with fire. So, while holding a jar in one hand, he had a vial of water in the other, just in case.

Of course, it was needed. The jar slipped on the substance, hitting the grass below with enough of a thud to stir the cluster of bugs on the branch he was collecting from.

“Oh, you’re kidding me,” Varian panic deadpanned. Fumbling in his hurry, he dumped the contents of the vial onto the bugs, lulling them back into their slumber.

“Varian, stop trying to start a forest fire,” Lance scolded, quietly.

“I am not—” the shorter young man said, a little too loud. Lance immediately muffled him with his hand.

After Cassandra closed the lid on her own jar, she caught both their attention by miming a sliced throat. Both students got the general message. Either: *“Be quiet or we’re all dead.”* Or, cause it’s Cass. *“Be quiet or I’ll kill you.”*

After a while, Nuru found herself staring more and more at the coffee/hot cocoa maker on the table. Ruddiger had chewed through his apple, and was now contently dozing off next to her. The starry eyed student sighed. She supposed it would be rude to use the machine without asking (even though she really did not want to speak to the entirely impolite young man her friend called a roommate).

“Ahem,” she tried to get his attention.

He did not look up from the paper he was reading.

“Ahem!” She said, louder this time.

“Yeah?” He didn’t look up.

“May I use your coffee maker? The one that I won for you?”

Hugo scoffed. “By all means.”

With no more delay, she got to making herself a drink. It really was a nice machine. Not as nice as the one in her room, but still, it did the job. When she’d given it to the roommates, she had half expected them to destroy it in some fight over sharing. The fact that it was sitting here, in one piece, gave her some hope for the two of them. But not much.

Most of the good will she had initially had for Hugo had quickly been lost due to Varian’s first hand accounts (rants) about him, and the lanky student’s own rude actions that she’d witnessed.

Overall, he was getting on her nerves.

“What even are these assignments?” Hugo muttered to himself, eyes still on his paper.

Nuru glanced at his papers. “Magicology?”

He didn’t answer. She knew she was right though.

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that the teachers here can be a little, loosey-goosey with their instructions. At the moment, I think I still prefer my old homeschooling tutors.”

“Amen to that,” Hugo murmured.

Nuru’s expression softened. “You were homeschooled too?”

“Most of my life,” he said, before looking slightly panicked. “Not much more to say about it than that.”

Nuru hummed, turning back to the coffee maker.

So was Varian, I think. Guess we all have that in common. She thought.

The machine beeped when her drink was ready, putting an end to her train of thought.

“Thanks for letting me use this,” she said as she sat back down.

“Yeah, sure,” he paused. “I’ll give you this much credit, you’re a lot more polite than Goggles ever is. I can literally fill the whole pot for myself, turn my back for a single second, turn back around and it’s gone. The nerve of that guy.”

“Tragic,” Nuru said with no emotion in her voice.

Hugo ignored her tone. “It is, really. I swear that guy has a serious caffeine addiction,” he laughed. “Maybe that’s why he collapses when he sleeps. I mean it, he fully drops like he’s dead.” *At least I always attempt to look more casual when I die of exhaustion.* He thought with mirth.

Nuru stared at him for a long moment.

“You know, for someone who hates their roommate, you talk about him a lot.”

Hugo grew genuinely confused. “What are you implying?”

“Nothing, yet. Just stating the data.”

The blond huffed, but did not retort her.

For now, Nuru would consider that a win.

Soon after, Ruddiger awoke and started running around the room after Hugo’s robotic pet mouse, Olivia.

Despite the damage they caused, it was very cute.

“Is it supposed to be doing that?” Eugene asked, cautiously eying the small glowing objects.

“Yep,” Varian muttered.

“And they aren’t gonna catch on fire later?” Lance asked, more curious than nervous.

“Nope,” Varian murmured.

“Are you sure about that?” Cass asked, skeptical as ever.

“Yes,” Varian replied.

“I’m sure you’re sure, but do you need any more help with that?” Rapunzel asked, hovering above where he was hunched over.

“No. This should be the last one.”

Peering down at the final stickers through his goggles, Varian ever so carefully released a single droplet of the newly mixed alchemical liquid onto its surface. Silently, he watched as it absorbed into the object. When the last of it was gone, and no explosions nor fire followed, Varian rejoiced.

“It worked!” Varian jumped up from the chair, practically hopping around the room in a show of pride. Unbeknownst to him, the rest of the group let out a collective sigh of relief.

Then, Eugene crossed his arms. “I thought you said you were sure it would!”

Varian stopped his celebrations. “Yeah... but it’s always nice to be right,” he laughed nervously.

In his pocket, Varian’s mirrorphone buzzed. Nuru had texted:

You almost back? Ruddiger looks like he misses you. Also, he broke one of your beakers.

Varian grimaced. He quickly texted back:

Almost! And no more apples for him (only for tonight).

Varian tucked the object away, smiling at the rest of his friends.

“Alright, let’s get these up! Then I’ll get Nuru to come and see!”

After the sun had begun to set, and Nuru had sent her next message asking Varian when he would be free to hang out, Hugo’s own mirrorphone rang. As he stared down at the screen, for the briefest moment, Nuru saw him flinch.

Then she blinked and it was gone. But she knew what she saw.

He answered casually. “Cyrus! What’s up? Nothing much. I’m just having a little study session with a fellow student. No, not my roommate. Is there anything urgent happening?”

Nuru unconsciously raised an eyebrow as she listened, her attention still on Ruddiger. Unfortunately for her, (and fortunately for the future Sorcerer), the only voice she could hear was Hugo’s.

“Mom wants to talk? About what? Hold on, don’t hand her the—” he coughed. “Hey Don. How’s it going?”

“Is your foot healing well?” His mother inquired.

“As good as it can be. Should be healed in a few more days.”

“Good. We’re behind schedule. You’ll have to pull some jobs on the same night to catch up.”

Hugo swallowed his disappointment. “Not an issue for me!”

“Good,” Donella said before going quiet. “You were on speaker while talking to Cyrus, just so you know.”

The already pale young man was sure his face had gone sheet white.

“What’s this about a study session?”

“Nothing to worry about!” he answered immediately. “I was just joking.”

Donella’s voice went cold. “Lying to the woman who taught you to lie is never a good idea, Hugo.”

Her son suddenly felt very small. “Sorry.”

She knows. She totally knows. Hugo’s mind raced a mile a minute with all the horrible possibilities her words could imply.

Maybe she was feeling merciful today. Maybe she didn’t want to get into it while someone was in the room, on either end of the call. Maybe she wasn’t going to let this go, and instead just save it for later. Maybe she really didn’t know how he had messed up, and her only issue this time really was that Hugo seemingly had a friend.

Whatever the case, Donella simply sighed and the ice in her tone was dropped for now. “Remember what we talked about.”

“Like I’d ever forget,” he said, seriously.

Then, he heard a distant voice on her end of the call. The Sorcerer clicked her tongue. “I have to go. Cyrus will call you back later with the details of a job you should prepare for when your foot is healed. Bye.”

“Bye,” the future sorcerer said, but the call was already over. He let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. Despite how dreadful that call could have gone, she still didn’t seem to know that Hugo had caused the recent chaos with the pets. It wouldn’t be the first little mistake he’d gotten away with, but still...

Nuru coughed. Hugo spun his head around to look at her.

“Was,” she started to say. “Was that your Mom?”

Hugo fought to hold his mask of casualness up. “Yeah. She can be a worrier sometimes. She calls a lot, making sure I’m okay.”

Nuru nodded. “You address your Mom by her name?”

Hugo frowned. “Yeah. So what? You’re gonna look down on me from some pedestal, Practically-a-Princess?” It came out with as much malice as he meant it by, masking a deeper, unnamed discomfort.

“No, I was just confused. My parents are worriers too.” she said, and he was almost inclined to think he heard honesty in her tone. “Guess that’s why I was homeschooled for so long. It was aggravating at the time, but nowadays, I kinda miss it.”

Nuru looked him in the eye. “Do you feel that way sometimes too?”

Hugo wanted to retort with... something. Anything to end this conversation.

But it seemed the Universe loved him this evening, because before he could even open his mouth, his dorm door swung open.

“Hey!” Varian announced. “Nuru! You’ve gotta come see this!”

Nuru beamed, rushing over to her friend, ready to follow him out the door.

For a split second, she stopped, almost turning around to look back at the lanky blond still sitting at his desk. Whatever thought initially stopped her in her tracks fled just as fast as it came.

And with that she left with her actual friend.

Hugo let out another breath of relief when she left. He’d felt too exposed right then. If that was what having “friends” felt like all the time, you could gladly count him out.

At least Goggles never asked him stupid personal questions like that.

As they walked down the hall, making their way from the boys dorms to the girls dorms, Varian nudged Nuru.

“So, are you feeling better?”

“A bit. I guess I’m still bummed not to be using the Observatory.” After a decently distracting afternoon she’d had, Nuru wasn’t eager to delve back into her own disappointment about that situation again. Shaking herself, she changed the subject. “What are you bringing me to see again?”

Varian hummed, but said nothing. Nuru observed him, suspicious. He was up to something, but what it was she couldn’t theorize. It wasn’t until they reached her door that she got a clue as to what this was all about. From the voices behind her door, she guessed this was bigger than just Varian.

“Lucky for you,” she said with a grin, before he could open the door, “I have energy to hang out with people right now.”

“I have no idea what you could mean by that,” Varian suppressed his own joyful expression. Then, he opened the door. The room was lit, so Nuru could see her friend’s friends (maybe they were her friends now too. She’d like to think so) were standing there.

“Surprise!” They said in unison, pointing to her ceiling. This confused her, until she stepped closer to see that there were more objects up there than she remembered

“Extra star stickers?” Nuru questioned. “Thanks, but I do already have those, you know?”

“But,” Varian said, showman-like. “You don’t have one like these. Kill the lights!”

Then the room went dark.

The star stickers were bright, multicolored, and very well crafted (by hand, she guessed). But what the starry eyed student really found so wonderful was that...

“They move?!”

“Yes!” Varian exclaimed, as one of the hologram-like stars went over his head. “With the help of that brightness spell from Magicology today, and a bit of alchemical potion brewing, they can now glide around the room. And, if you ever need to shut them off, just use the counteracting brightness spell! Easy peasy!”

Nuru stood speechless.

Varian fiddled with his gloves. “I... know a thing or two about being homesick. But, what helped me was realizing I wasn’t alone. And neither are you! You have friends who will worry about you when you’re upset. So, if you’re feeling down, we’re gonna help you feel better.”

“Yeah!” Rapunzel added. The others echoed her sentiment.

Nuru still stood speechless.

Varian shifted. Maybe this wasn’t the best idea after all.

“Like I said, you can always shut them off it you—”

“I love them!” Nuru shouted, a radiant ear-to-ear smile on her face! “Shut them off?! Are you kidding?! I dare anyone to try! This is—!”

Nuru quickly gathered Varian into an embrace, which he reciprocated without hesitation.

“It may not be outer space,” she pulled back. “But it’s just as special, 'cause my friends made them!” She stared up at the floating, glowing images, fully grinning like a cheshire with eyes reflecting all the light of the cosmos.

“Okay, let’s get to classifying these brand new celestial objects! This one looks like a nebula, so ___”

The rest of the night was spent on naming every mini star, planet, nebula, space dust, etc on Nuru’s ceiling. And, if more than one object was named after all of the students crammed into her dorm, then so be it. Ultimately, Nuru was a little less homesick that day. So was Varian, and the rest of their friends who were present.

Elsewhere, Hugo had waited a few minutes after Nuru and Varian left before even looking at his mirrorphone. Eventually, though, he had no reason not to call his guardians back.

When he did, they answered immediately.

“Okay, what are the details this time?”

Chapter End Notes

@ Hugo: *megamind meme* No friends?

ALSO There really are two planets that are gonna overlap this week! Jupiter and Venus! It's happening March 1st so if you have the opportunity take a look! It's gonna be cloudy where I am so make the most of it wherever you are!

Hope y'all enjoyed this chapter! Kudos and comments are always welcome. Remember to get some rest and DRINK SOME WATER PLEASE AND THANK YOU!!!!

Next chapter hint: Hmmm. I feel like I'm missing something... or rather, someone..... 

Moving Up

Chapter Summary

Varian is asked (told without option) to let a middle schooler shadow him for the day. He can handle one highly intelligent, danger-prone child... right?

Chapter Notes

I think we're missing someone in our cast... let's remedy that! Hope y'all enjoy this chapter. Have a wonderful spring!!!

WAIT A MINUTE. THIS IS RELEASING ON THE 1 YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF WHEN I STARTED THIS FIC!!!!

Shout out to the folks who have been here since day one, and shout out to the anyone joining today! I am so glad this fic has been bringing joy to people! I hope to continue to bring y'all joy with every new chapter!!!! 🥰

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“Final order of business for today,” Headmaster Grimm addressed his staff of Professors gathered in the meeting room. “The ‘Moving-Up’ program has one accepted applicant this year. As such—”

“Milton, is this correct? The middle schooler moving up early this year is from Oz?”

“Yes,” the Headmaster huffed. “More importantly, we will need a student for him to shadow for his first day in attendance. Your insight would be most helpful.”

“Naturally, since they are in the same story, I would suggest we have Varian Gale be the student he will shadow,” Professor Knight spoke up.

“Dorothy’s son,” Grimm mulled it over. “An unusual young man, to be sure. I gave him a detention during his Legacy Day rehearsal. He seems to be aligning himself with the Rebels. Has this behavior improved, in your views?”

“Hardly,” Rumpelstiltskin grumbled. “He’s in two of my science classes. I doubt those are destiny related for a future Dorothy.”

“And,” Baby Yaga interjected. “He’s in my Magicology class.”

Grimm hummed. On the one hand, he was hesitant to actively expose the new student to any aspect of the Rebel mindsets fluttering around the school’s halls. On the other hand...

“Perhaps meeting with this Ozian boy will help set this future Dorothy on the right path.”

“That still doesn’t address the other issue,” Rumpelstiltskin said.

Grimm raised an eyebrow. “Which is?”

“This year, Varian Gale is much more prone to confrontations with other students.”

Baby Yaga laughed joylessly. “You say ‘students’ as if there isn’t only one that he’s been having issues with.”

“Who?”

“Donella Cast’s son.”

“Hugo,” Grimm exhaled in barely hidden disdain. He wanted to say what he knew of the student. Not just that he was a known troublemaker, who in the past had even attended a reformatory school (however briefly it was). He wanted to speak on his suspicions that the student had not, in reality, outgrow the thieving behaviors that got him sent there in the first place (although he had no proof as of yet). Most of all, Grimm wanted to say how under no circumstances should a student with such an uncertain link to his destiny, an adopted child, be influencing the incoming youth.

But Grimm said none of that.

The Headmaster, the personal keeper of the Storybook of Legends, knew that the other staff members were unaware of these details regarding Hugo Cast. They especially did not know of the latter detail. Perhaps they held silent suspicions of him being adopted; they may have seen him perform magic on brooms, mops, or water without it backfiring, as it should— as it *did* — for a Sorcerer’s Apprentice.

The majority of, if not all, magical students had a quirk that came from their destiny. The result of generations of magic users focusing on the same kinds of spells, or vice versa. For example, when Raven Queen, daughter of the Evil Queen, tried to use her magic for good, it would backfire, sometimes subtly and sometimes fantastically. The flashier moments were easy to spot, but Grimm knew from experience that most of the school’s students would not notice the smaller backfires.

Hugo had no backfires at all.

While Grimm was sure the students either did not know or did not care to understand why this was, he was not foolish enough to believe his more perceptive staff members had not taken note of it.

However, only Grimm had confirmed his suspicions by going to The Sorcerer herself. He had to.

In all his years running this school, Grimm had never actively known of a student who was adopted, inheriting a destiny. Such a thing was an irregularity in the bitter old man’s mind. He conceded to himself that it was possible that there could have been students in the past who were, just without his knowledge. If so, then they must have moved onto their destined path without notice or issue.

But, Grimm couldn’t be sure. The uncertainty of the situation was what made him so nervous. Scared into silence.

Until any of that became a public issue, if ever, he would not be the one to make it so.

“I will speak to both Gale and Cast regarding these issues. Are there any other relevant concerns?”

Silence followed.

“Then the matter is settled,” Grimm said with a thin, forced smile. “I am positive our newest student will be shown a warm welcome to Ever After High.”

“Varian! We’re gonna be late for breakfast,” Eugene shouted, standing with Lance, Cassandra, Rapunzel, and Nuru.

“Just give me two more minutes!” Varian shouted back.

A chorus of groans echoed from his doorway.

“You said that five minutes ago!” Cassandra reminded him.

Varian adjusted the goggles on his face, keeping his focus solely on the task at hand. He had woken up at nearly five o’clock in the morning with the idea for this alchemical solution. After trying and failing and trying again and failing again to complete it for the past few hours, he was utterly determined to reach the finish line. He could feel that he was close to completing it by now. Call it his alchemist-instinct.

His gloved hands worked as securely as they always did. He was so calm, in fact, that he could even ignore the nagging question of why Hugo was still here.

Luckily, Nuru had the same inquiry.

“You’re not coming to breakfast with us, right?” She asked with the perfect amount of dislike and intrigue. Grace and coldness.

“Nope,” Hugo glanced up at her from where he sat on his bed, lacing up his boots (finally free of that awful foot cast, much to his and Don’s relief). “I’m just waiting to make sure *my* room isn’t filled with smoke,” he stared daggers at Varian. “Again.”

“*Our* room,” Varian murmured. “And there’s no need! Once I add this last chemical, I’ll be all done. And I can guarantee that no explosions, nor smoke, will follow.”

Nuru and the others all braced themselves.

Varian lifted the dropper in his hand and added three drops to the substance.

Hugo checked the clock on their wall. “And in three, two, one...”

Boom.

A cloud of smoke surrounded the desk, spreading throughout the room.

Varian hacked, frantically lifting the orange bandana around his neck to cover his mouth.

“There it is,” Hugo pushed his glasses higher up his nose, trying to avoid any smoke from reaching his eye. Then, he snapped his fingers and a broom from the corner lifted up and began waving out the smoke out the open window.

Varian's friends ran in and fanned out the smoke with jackets and extra blankets (which they grabbed off their friend's bed). After it was all mostly gone, the group nervously eyed the fire alarm.

Hugo quickly became aware of their stares. "Relax. I tweaked the detector a while ago. It won't go off in this room." The last thing the blond needed was their room being beset by firefighters and school personnel.

Don would have an aneurysm if that happened.

Besides, Hugo could just magic over some water if fires needed to be put out. The upside to being adopted was that Hugo didn't have any backfiring effects when he dealt with water, mops, or brooms, as it did for Sorcerer's Apprentices of the past. Yippee!

So, yeah, no fire alarm.

With that over with, Hugo left.

"That's probably for the best," Eugene conceded. "With how many of these magical soups go up in smoke."

Varian stuttered. "Not *all* of my solutions go up in smoke."

"No, but at least half do," Eugene responded.

Nuru quietly murmured, "I would say 60%."

Lance laughed. "Sounds about right."

Cassandra nudged Nuru. "You should've seen him in middle school. How he didn't get expelled for all the explosions he caused, I'll never understand. And that's before you mention—"

"You're exaggerating," Varian interrupted, fast.

Rapunzel winced. "She's really not."

Varian stood there sputtering and stumbling over his words in outrage.

Eugene put an arm over his shoulder. "It's not something to be ashamed of. Just because you're smart doesn't mean you know everything yet."

Varian crossed his arms.

Eugene tapped the shorter student's forehead. "One of these days, you have got to get that through your oh-so-scientific head."

Varian batted away Eugene's hand. "All I'm gonna say is that however, um, uncoordinated I was back then, my scientific methods were not the problem."

"Keep telling yourself that, bud." Cassandra deadpanned, before unceremoniously dragging him out of the room so they could finally have breakfast.

Varian continued to mutter his outrage out all the way to the Castleteria. Once he'd at last sat down with his food, however, he decided to let his pride rest.

Unfortunately, Varian, Nuru, and the rest of the gang had barely taken a few bites when, above them, the school announcement speakers rattled out:

“Varian Gale and Hugo Cast, please report to Headmaster Grimm’s office immediately.”

From the other side of the Castleteria, the group heard an indignant shout.

“Seriously?” Hugo exclaimed.

“Seriously.” The speaker responded.

Secretary Trollworth was the first to greet them, in the waiting room.

Apparently, the word “***immediately***” in the announcement was less urgent than it originally felt.

Not surprising. Didn’t help the nerves though.

“You don’t think this is about the smoke earlier, right?” Varian whispered, as he unconsciously adjusted the goggles on his head, debating taking them off before heading into the Headmaster’s office.

“Not unless I’m suddenly a bad technician,” Hugo whispered back. “Cause the fire detector in our room is dead as a doornail. There’s no way he would know.”

“Unless someone saw the smoke going out the window,” Varian said.

Both roommates suddenly looked a little paler.

“Well, I’m not taking the fall for your stupidity, Hairstripe.”

Varian faux gasped. “No, really? That’s so cold! And so very out of character for you!”

Then, Trollworth said that the Headmaster was ready to see them. By that point, the roommates were ready to rebuttal any accusations he may throw at them; smoke related or otherwise.

These went unused.

“I’ll trust you’re aware of our ‘Moving-Up’ program?” Headmaster Grimm started.

The pair hid their mutual relief behind fake coughs.

“I’ll assume that’s a yes,” Grimm said, before explaining anyway. “This program brings certain academically exceptional students, often middle schoolers, up by a grade or two. Originally, we only covered Ever After schools, but with the students from Wonderland here this year, we decided that expanding to other kingdoms would be worth the effort. This year, we have only one student moving up. He is from the Land of Oz’s middle school for fairytale children. More specifically, he is the son of the Scarecrow.”

Varian was agape. “From *my* story?”

Headmaster Grimm nodded.

“Wait,” Varian said. “I thought I wasn’t supposed to meet the other characters in my story until I actually go to Oz? Do you need me to avoid him or something?”

“No,” Grimm said. “It’s not a necessary requirement that you don’t know them. Only that they join your destined journey. The first Dorothy apparently didn’t even know Oz existed, but all Dorothy’s afterwards did. It’s about the journey, not your knowledge of how it ends. Destiny works in mysterious ways.”

Varian resisted the urge to roll his eyes at that statement.

“For his first day, he will need a student to shadow while he gets accustomed to this institution. Mr. Gale, I’d like you to be the one he shadows.”

Varian blinked. “Um, thank you. But, do I have a choice in this?”

“No, you do not.”

“Obviously,” Hugo scoffed, more so at Varian’s expense than anything else.

“Regardless,” Grimm continued. “You will be taking this new student through what an average day here at Ever After High looks like. At the end of the day, you will bring him to Baba Yaga’s office so that he may sort out his schedule for the year.”

“Sounds easy enough,” Varian said. “What’s the catch?”

“No catch. Simply be sure to give him a positive view on this school, and what it stands for: each student honoring their destined legacy. Will that be a problem for you?”

Varian tensed. Hugo pretended not to notice his reaction. He had more pressing concerns.

“Yeah, that’s real fine and dandy and all,” Hugo spat out. “But why am *I* here?”

The Headmaster frowned. “You are here because my concern with Gale is not limited to his supposed thoughts on destiny. It has come to my attention that the two of you have been, let’s call it, uncooperative in your mutual classes.”

“He starts most of it,” Hugo said, immediately, almost as if in panic. But Hugo doesn’t panic.

Varian whipped his head towards the blond. “That is not true. You are constantly picking fights with me about everything!”

“Me? Who spilled an entire beaker of boiling iodine onto my notebook in the middle of class, on purpose!”

“It was an accident!”

“Oh likely story,” Hugo said sarcastically. “You’re ‘smarter’ than that.”

“Huh?!” Varian shrieked. “That’s—”

“Exactly my point,” Grimm held the bridge of his nose. “Students' personal squabbles with one another are rarely my concern. However, such behavior could give the wrong impression of this school to such a young, impressionable mind. Thus, for today, I am asking you both to refrain from any more of these skirmishes. Am I being clear?”

The students side eyed each other, bitterly, before muttering a vague ‘yes’ in response.

This did not satisfy the Headmaster.

“And of course, if any issues arise, it may result in detention. I recall that you both have already had one detention each this semester. Per school policy, if you are served three detentions, I will have to contact your parents.”

This time, both Varian and Hugo froze.

“As such, let’s stop at one, agreed?”

The duo nodded.

“Perfect.” Grimm then tapped a button on his desk. “Secretary Trollworth, is the Ozian here yet?”

“Just arrived.”

“Send him in.”

A few moments later, the door swung open, giving both high schoolers their first look at the new student.

Same as with Varian’s destiny, any gender could fill the roles. Unlike with princesses and prince charmings (heteronormative as they were), his story held that rare flexibility. Mostly due to the absence of any romantic plotlines. In the context of the Wizard of Oz tale, ‘Dorothy’ had become a gender neutral name.

So, Varian had grown up knowing that his future companions could end up being any possible gender. So, it wasn’t a given that the Scarecrow would be a boy.

However, that is what appeared to be the case.

The middle schooler had blackish-brown hair (similar to Varian’s, but minus his signature blue streak) contrasted against pale skin (unlike Varian’s tan, freckled, skin). He wore a bright red shirt, with sleeves that looked ever so slightly too long for his arms.

It was obvious from how he stared around the room that he was fascinated by every little thing in the office.

“Welcome to Ever After, Yong Scarecrow,” Grimm spoke. “I’m quite certain you will thrive in this school. To help you get acclimated, you will be shadowing Mr. Gale. He is the next destined Dorothy. I’ll trust that he can answer any of your questions.”

“Hello,” Varian stood from his chair, awkwardly.

The boy wearing red stood with sparkling eyes. After a few moments of stunned silence, he ran up to Varian, grabbing his hand.

“I’m Yong,” he said, shaking the freckled student’s hand almost violently.

“I heard,” Varian smiled.

“Yong Scarecrow.”

“I heard that too,” Varian hummed.

“What’s your name?”

“Oh, it’s Varian.”

“Where did you get that blue streak in your hair?”

“Oh, this? It’s nothing, just—”

“I like your goggles.”

“Thank you, they were my—”

“I can’t believe I’m talking to *the* future Dorothy!”

Varian winced. “You have a very strong grip.”

Yong stopped, dropping Varian’s hand. “Sorry,” he genuinely looked apologetic.

Hugo snorted. “Got a live one there.”

Varian glared at him.

A buzzing sounded off at Grimm’s desk. “Would you look at the time? I’m afraid I have other matters to attend to. I will have to ask that you all vacate my office now.”

Without further delay, Grimm sent all the three of them on their way.

“Do you think we still have time for breakfast?” Varian asked Hugo.

Then, the first bell rang.

“Nope,” Hugo said, already walking to class.

“He was nice,” Yong commented.

“Not his intention, I assure you,” Varian turned to the boy. “Ready to get moving?”

Yong nodded. “Lead the way Doro— um, Varian!”

Varian grimaced, but did his best to hide it.

In Science and Sorcery, Varian immediately felt the eyes on him. It was bound to happen, he supposed. It wasn’t every day that a new student, especially one this young, joined their class. It also didn’t help that Yong was a social butterfly.

“What’s your name?” the boy said to the pair sitting in front of them. “I’m Yong.”

So, yes, the other students were focusing on them today. Big whoop. But it wasn’t just the students.

Despite the Professor’s perpetually burrowed brows, it was obvious to Varian that Rumpelstiltskin was watching not only him, but Hugo too. No doubt, he was making sure they both sent the right “impression,” in the Headmaster’s words.

As Yong continued speaking to the surrounding students, Hugo leaned over to Varian. “Is this kid going to do this in every class today?”

Varian refrained from taking the bait, and did not respond to Hugo. He had no desire to get a second detention today, thank you very much.

Evidently, the blond then seemed to notice the Professor’s gaze, and subtly moved away.

Satisfied, the Professor hacked out a shout, getting the attention of his students.

“If you all did your reading for today, then you’ll find today’s lecture simple and easy.”

A chorus of groans followed. None from Varian and Hugo.

The first half of the lecture flew by. As was typical, Rumpelstiltskin’s questions were complicated, and at times almost every soul in the room had to wonder, “was this really in the reading?”

Luckily, the experienced science-lovers/roommate haters in the room always did their own research to fill in any potential blanks.

Sometimes Hugo would get the answer right first.

“I’m surprised you knew that one, Glasses,” Varian would sometimes say under his breath.

“Aw, you should already know I’m full of surprises, Goggles,” Hugo would sometimes say back. And if he happened to flutter his eyelashes behind his lenses while saying this, Varian refused to acknowledge it.

Other times, Varian would get it first.

“Well, guess there’s a thought behind those baby blue eyes after all,” Hugo would often whisper.

“Oh, I’ve got *a lot* of thoughts for you,” Varian would often mutter back, making clear in his tone that if thoughts could kill, Hugo would be in trouble. At this point, Hugo was used to looks like that from Varian.

But then came a question that seemed to stump them both.

Yong shifted in the chair that had been pulled up to the desk for him.

Varian ran a hand through his own bangs. *Why don’t I remember this?* He pondered. *It’s a simple question of synthetic fibers. That’s easy peasy!*

“It’s benzene” a voice mumbled beside him.

The freckled student turned to the middle schooler. “What?”

Yong was rocking in his seat, looking like he was going to explode. “The answer is benzene. Say it’s benzene,” he sounded so sure.

Varian shot a hand up, blurting out the answer.

The Professor announced that he was correct.

Varian blinked in delight. He turned to his shadow. “Thanks Yong. How did you know that?”

“I used to take all kinds of science, magic, anything classes back in Oz. Anything they would let me take,” Yong said. He spoke very fast, his arms swinging at his sides.

Varian grinned. “Sounds like you’re a fan of alchemy?”

“Definitely!” Yong beamed. “And science, and magic, like I said, but especially anything that has to do with pyrotechnics! That’s what I’m good at, I think. I knew the answer cause I remembered that benzene is one of the chemicals used you’re never ever supposed to use in fireworks,” Yong snorted in laughter. “I learned that the hard way.”

Varian raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

Yong froze. “Um...”

“Well,” Hugo leaned towards Varian and Yong. “If it’s science and magic you’re interested in, you’ve stumbled upon the best possible person to get info from.”

Yong gasped. “Varian’s a scientist? I didn’t know Dorothy’s could do that?!”

Varian glanced around. “I–”

Hugo coughed. “No, no, I was referring to myself, kid. You’re talking to the son of the Sorcerer.”

“Oh wow! The Sorcerer!” Yong nodded. “Who’s that?”

Hugo went slack-jawed.

Varian laughed way too loudly at that one. It earned him a nasty stare from the Professor, but it was worth it.

Hugo collected himself. “Fine, I give up. If he doesn’t know who the Sorcerer is, then I’m afraid my efforts will be in vain. He’s all yours Goggles.”

Varian dead-pan stared at him. “Wow, your generosity is legendary, Glasses.”

“It is, I know,” Hugo smirked.

By the end of the session, not only had Yong learned a lot from the lecture, but Varian had only had to explain a few concepts to him.

All in all, Varian was very impressed by the boy.

“Where did you learn about all these things again?”

“Like I said, school,” Yong said, a little shakily. Varian brushed it off as bashfulness.

“If this is the kind of thing they teach in Oz middle schools, remind me to visit the Oz Universities sometime.”

Yong smiled. “I’ll remind you when we’re in our story!”

Varian’s expression fell, much to Yong’s confusion.

While Science and Sorcery had gone smoothly in regards to the assignments, Chemythstry was a different story.

Today’s Chemythstry session was not a lecture, but an experiment! Consequently, still so happy to be shadowed by an appreciator of science, magic, and everything in between, Varian allowed himself to become immersed in his work with Yong.

“Yong, how would you like to help me make this solution?”

“Really?” Yong yelled, garnering a few too many stares for Varian’s liking, including from Hugo. “Absolutely!”

“And don’t worry if you don’t know everything. I’ll be here if you have any questions,” Varian said.

“Okay,” Yong said, before pointing at a beaker full of shimmering liquid. “What does this do?”

Things were going smoothly for a while. Varian found that Yong was a fast learner. Perhaps a little too fast. Eventually, the boy picked up one of the vials with a look of immense fascination and focus.

Varian was about to direct him to drop only a small bit of it into their central beaker.

But before he could Yong emptied the entire vial.

In an instant, Varian scrambled for the neutralizer, dumping it into the central beaker before any disaster could occur. The liquid returned to its original state, safely.

“Guess we’ll have to start over, now,” Varian yawned.

Yong’s expression fell dramatically, and Varian almost winced. It was one little mistake, after all. No big deal.

Then, the younger student shook himself. “I’ll get this failed substance out of here!” He said, quickly moving to grab the glass object, while the bunsen burner was still on. One of his loose sleeves swung too low, catching itself on the still active flame and bursting into orange and red light.

“Ow!”

“Yong!” Varian yelled. He grabbed the sleeve with one of his gloved hands and frantically patted the flame out. At the same time, and surprising Varian, Hugo took his water bottle, leaned over, and

poured its contents onto the sleeve.

In a matter of moments, the crisis had been averted.

Varian breathed out a sigh. "Of all students, you should be the most careful about catching on fire. You're literally going to one day be made of straw."

Yong laughed, hurt obvious in his voice. "Silly, huh?"

"No. Scary. I fear for you."

Near enough to be heard, Hugo chuckled. Varian shot him a look. Hugo raised an eyebrow back at him, as if to say *Did I say anything?*

Varian turned to Yong. "How's your hand?"

"It's fine," he sounded less than confident.

Varian gently took his hand and examined the damage. The skin was only red, not bubbled or broken. Varian felt a little less tense. Burns were serious business.

Regardless, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Varian. "Professor, I'm taking Yong to the nurse."

Rumpelstiltskin simply waved his hand in a motion that the students had come to understand meant "just go."

The walk to the nurse was mostly silent. Until...

"I'm sorry," Yong said. He avoided eye contact with Varian and played with his non-burned sleeve.

"It's okay," Varian said simply. It was just one mistake after all. These things happened. "Just be more careful when you use the equipment, and try to check in with me if we're working together, okay?"

Yong nodded in agreement, a small smile returning to his face.

After Yong had gotten his burn fixed up, quite easily with magic, they returned to class. But, by the time they sat down, the bell rang and class was over.

Much to Varian's disappointment.

Yong noticed that.

By the time they reached Magicology, Varian was starting to feel exhaustion creep up on him. It was still early in the day, almost lunchtime, so normally he wouldn't be feeling this sluggish so soon. Determining the cause wasn't difficult though; maybe being awake since before the sun had risen to perform an experiment wasn't the best idea.

Pair that was being shadowed for the day and stopping himself from even speaking to Hugo, let alone fighting with him, and the whole scenario became very draining.

Needless to say, Varian was happy to see his friend Nuru in Magicology. He found her at their usual seating place.

“Hey Nu—” Varian barely began to say before Yong jumped ahead.

“I’m Yong!” He held out his hand.

“He’s Yong,” Varian repeated.

Nuru raised an eyebrow, but took his hand. “Pleasure to meet you Yong, I’m Nuru Star.”

“Let’s get started, class,” Baba Yaga announced. “Today’s lesson will involve a particularly volatile spell. If you listen to my instructions, there should be no issues.”

“You heard that, Goggles?” Hugo said, smirking.

“Yes, I did, Glasses,” Varian said before he could stop himself.

“Additionally,” Baba Yaga stressed. “Let’s all be on our best behavior to welcome the new student today.”

Yong waved happily at the other students. Meanwhile, Baba Yaga stared intently at Varian, which he saw.

Call me out by name, why don’t you? Varian thought. And why not stare at Hugo too? I’m not the problem here.

Varian sighed. It didn’t take a child prodigy to see that he was agitated.

Nuru leaned over. “What’s up?”

“It’s nothing, just tired,” Varian said.

Unseen by the freckled student, Yong sank into his chair ever so slightly.

After that, the Professor gave out the instructions for the day’s magical task.

Varian straightened his goggles. “Okay, first off we’ll need to perform—”

The pair heard Hugo mutter something under his breath. Yong didn’t immediately think anything of it, but Varian seemed to.

Slowly, Varian turned his head to look at Hugo.

“Something to add, roommate?” Varian said, through gritted teeth.

“I didn’t say anything,” Hugo responded, seemingly engrossed in his own task.

Varian hummed. “That’s what I thought.” He then turned back to Yong.

“Doofus,” Hugo muttered.

Varian tossed his head back towards the blond. “I heard that,” he did his best not to yell.

Hugo frowned. “Oh *now* you can hear?”

“I could always hear!”

“Really? I figured all those explosions would have busted your ear drums by now.”

Varian’s face scrunched up indignantly.

As they argued, just quiet enough to avoid the Madam’s ire, Nuru stared at them with a blasé expression. Then, Yong tugged at her sleeve.

“Are they going to stop soon?” He asked.

“Hard to say. They do this way too much. Today, I’m gonna say it’s not my circus,” Nuru turned back to her equipment. “They’ll run out of steam eventually.”

Yong looked confused. “Why would they sit so near to each other if they know they’ll fight like this?”

This got a dainty laugh out of Nuru, but not an answer. Yong was left perplexed.

Additionally, he was feeling very impatient for the distraction from the more interesting stuff (MAGIC) to be over.

“Um, Varian?” Yong tried to cut in. But Varian didn’t reply, or even seem to register his words. The boy looked back at the textbook. He re-read the instructions for the intended spell. It seemed easy enough.

Yong shook his head. He should wait for Varian.

But...

This could make up for my mistake last class! He thought. And I’ll impress Dorothy’s son. A scientist. Like me! I’ve got this. This time it’ll be fine.

His mind made up, he went ahead with the steps.

Up front, Baba Yaga kept her eyes on the two students that usually caused her problems. Just as she was about to break up their squabble, she began to observe the new student and his apparent proficiency with the assignment. In no time at all, he seemed to have reached the final step, the magical energy crackling loudly.

The noise snapped Varian out of his argument with Hugo.

“Yong?” Varian turned to his shadow. Seeing Yong holding a small magical flame in his hand, he panicked. “Yong!”

Yong glanced at him. “Don’t worry, Varian! I’ve got this one.”

“Wait don’t,” Varian said, but it was too late. By the time the words left his mouth, the boy had tried dropping the flame into the spellbound container, without prepping it first.

Varian barely had time to duck his and Yong's heads down before the blaze expanded suddenly.

"Everyone remain calm," Baba Yaga exclaimed, rushing over to the flame to smother it with a magical-fire extinguisher. Within moments, all that was left of it was smoke. *A lot* of smoke.

"Well, that could've gone worse," Yong giggled skittishly. Varian looked close to bursting a blood vessel, but whether it was either from adrenaline, stress, or anger, Yong couldn't tell.

Then the fire alarm went off.

Outside the school, Varian paced.

He had long since tuned out the sight and sound of the fire trucks. He had tuned out the distant ringing of the still active fire alarm. As well as the crowds of students waiting for the all-clear to return to their classes. He had tuned out their conversations and speculations on where the fire started, and by who.

He knew that rumors spread fast, and one way or another this wouldn't look good for someone.

Varian knew what was coming. He was responsible for Yong today. There was no way he was getting off scot-free for this. He wasn't that lucky.

"Would you stop that?" A voice cut through Varian's thoughts, stopping him in his tracks. His eyes found the source: Hugo.

Unbeknownst to Varian, Hugo was finding no amusement in this situation. He had no jabs to throw out, nor did he want to. Fires were nothing to sneeze at. He knew this. But that's not what bothered him. The helplessness of it all was the worst part. It left him with empty hands and a wandering mind.

Again, this was unbeknownst to Varian, who took his words, as usual, as insult.

"I think I'm justified in being a little stressed, your Highness."

"True," Nuru joined the conversation. "But, I think someone else is a little more stressed at the moment."

She nodded towards Yong, who was sitting nearby on a rock and twiddling his thumbs. His expression was sunken and nerve-racked.

Varian ran a hand over his own face. "Is he hurt?"

"Nothing but his pride," Nuru responded.

Varian hummed. It'd be a lie if he said he wasn't upset with him. He'd taken his eyes off him for a few minutes, and disaster had struck!

Yes, he was young, but when Varian was his age—

"You should talk to him," Nuru spoke, pulling Varian from his thoughts.

Before he could process her words, the firefighters announced the school was safe to reenter.

“Yong! We’re heading in.”

The middle schooler rejoined the group in silence.

Varian wanted to say something, but as soon as they entered the building, the announcements came on.

“All students are to attend lunch in place of their fourth period classes. Fifth period will continue as normal.”

Hugo dramatically sighed in relief. *No Damsel-in-Distressing!* He thought.

Varian felt similarly about Hero Training. The joy was short-lived.

“Additionally, would Varian Gale please report to Headmaster Grimm’s office immediately.”

Yong turned his head towards Varian, visibly distraught.

Varian put on a brave face. “All be fine. Why don’t you head to lunch with Nuru? She’ll introduce you to all of our friends.”

“I—” Yong started to say, but stopped himself. His voice shook. “Okay.”

The entire walk down the hall, Yong kept his eyes on Varian, waiting for that one moment he was so familiar with. For the fake face to drop and for the real frustration to show on his face. It always happened when Yong caused incidents like this.

At first, the Castleteria with its high ceilings and bright colors and many students did make Yong feel a bit better. As he and Nuru made their around the setting, getting food for lunch and searching for Nuru’s friends, Yong made a habit of introducing himself to every person he got within speaking-distance of.

This ranged from the most Royal of students—such as Apple White who found him to be an absolute delight, herself a fervent supporter of the Moving-Up program, like her mother Queen Snow White. Although, he could have done without getting his cheek pinched— to the most Rebellious of students—including Raven Queen, who prevented his tray from completely splattering into the ground when the boy tripped. She levitated both him and his tray with her magic, which he was immensely star-struck by. Unfortunately, when she tried to use magic to clean the mess of food on his face, her spell made it look even worse. Nothing a non-magical napkin couldn’t fix, but she was still quite apologetic about it.

Eventually, the pair did sit down to eat, and Yong went to meet Nuru’s friends! Rapunzel was quick to introduce herself with a smile like the sun. Yong found her the most welcoming, but everyone else was great too! Eugene and Lance were both very amused at the idea of Varian “babysitting” a middle schooler for the day. As for Cassandra, she was the most reserved of the bunch, but Yong thought she was super cool.

But his good mood fell back into sorrow again, when...

“Is Varian still at Grimm’s office?” Eugene asked, clearly worried. The others also looked concerned for their friend. “Poor guy.”

Guilt bubbled back into Yong’s mind. In defeat, he dropped his head down on the table.

“What’s wrong?” Rapunzel asked.

Yong spoke into his arms, muffling his words.

“We can’t hear you, kid,” Cassandra said, mid-bite of her sandwich.

Yong lifted his head. “It’s my fault he’s in trouble. I started that fire in Magicology.”

“Wait, you set off the fire alarm?” Rapunzel asked, confused.

“Mhm,” Yong looked down. Silence followed. Yong waited for the other shoe to drop. The disappointment, the dislike, the pitying stares. Then, a loud chorus of laughter followed. He looked around the table. “What’s so funny?”

The girl with short black hair, Cassandra, calmed herself first. “We figured for sure it was Varian’s fault. Not just because of the announcement either. We love him, but back in the day, he set off too many fire alarms to count.”

Yong’s eyes widened. “He did?”

“Not that he’ll ever admit it,” Rapunzel said. “Cass and I went to middle school with him. He was very accident prone back then.”

“To say the least,” Cass added. For a second, the two friends exchanged a serious look. In the next second it was gone.

Yong sniffled. “But this time it was my fault. I’m sure he’s mad at me.” He didn’t mean any harm, honest! He just had bad luck, and a little less impulse control than he should. But he was working on it. Really! Not that he expected anyone to credit him with that.

“Try talking to him about it,” Eugene said. “Varian always tends to surprise people, usually for the best.” The others seemed to agree.

Yong tried to take their words to heart.

Before long, lunch was over, and Varian was still not back.

Nuru’s phone buzzed. “Varian just hexed. He’s gonna meet us all at Hexonomics.”

“Let’s get going then,” Rapunzel stood. As she started walking, Yong’s eyes went wide.

“She’s not wearing shoes,” Yong exclaimed, prompting more laughter from the group.

Before they left, Yong ran back to the lunch line and grabbed an apple and an orange.

Varian’s little meeting with Headmaster Grimm had gone surprisingly well.

He only got yelled at for, gosh, thirty straight minutes.

All in all it was not anything unexpected from Grimm. Varian had definitely been in worse pickles. What did concern was the detention he was slapped with. Since he was still being tasked with getting Yong through the rest of the day, Grimm made him serve his sentence during lunch. At the very least, it saved Varian from the stares he would have gotten there. Being called to the Headmaster's office, by name, right after a fire alarm, probably wasn't the best look.

Now he had two detentions on his record this year. Varian tried not to think about what would happen if he got a third. Golly, wouldn't that call to Dad be pleasant.

Unfortunately, by the time detention was over and he had reached Hexonomics, finally, Varian was starving. He stared down the sign by the chalkboard which read " No Food or Drink in Class " with a bitterness he was only capable of while hangry. Unconsciously, his hands found themselves fidgeting with his goggles and especially his gloves. He hated how empty they felt, but there was no need for them in this class, as it was a simple lecture.

To top it all off, Varian was still really upset with his shadow. The young man hadn't felt that embarrassed, nor mortified, due to a lab incident since he himself was in middle school. It was all horrid to remember and relive. If Yong had just listened! Ugh. Simultaneously, he wanted to be more upset, and less upset with him. However—

In the midst of his thoughts, Varian's stomach rumbled.

Beside him, Yong tugged at his sleeve.

Varian turned to look at him, with a harsher expression on his face than he intended.

"What?" Varian mumbled.

Yong nodded down to the unzipped backpack beside his chair. Inside Varian saw a fresh looking apple and a bright orange.

Varian snatched up the apple, before adjusting his notebook to cover his mouth, taking slow and careful bites to avoid suspicion.

"Thank you," Varian muttered.

"I just," Yong started to say. "Figured I owed you for getting you into trouble."

Varian continued eating on the apple.

Yong spoke with hesitancy. "Were you in a lot of trouble?"

"Well, I did get detention," Varian said.

Yong winced.

Finally the freckled student faced the boy. "Yong, you're smart, but you really should have known better than to rush ahead like that. This stuff, magic, science, alchemy, it can be very dangerous! Someone could have gotten hurt. *You* could've been hurt—"

“I’m really sorry,” Yong interrupted, avoiding eye contact. “I swore this wouldn’t happen again, but—” he went quiet.

Varian’s expression relaxed significantly. “Again?”

Yong crossed his arms. “Back in Oz, most of my ideas didn’t end well. I tried. I really did try. I just — I don’t know. It’s no wonder they sent me here after all that. Make me someone else’s problem. I’m sorry I wound up being yours.”

Varian, all at once, was swept away by a wave of *deja vu* and guilt. Yes, the incident did remind him of middle school, but now that reminder had turned from one of embarrassment to one of understanding.

Glass houses. Varian mentally kicked himself. How many times had *he* failed an experiment, started a fire, created disaster? Especially as a middle schooler? More than he’d care to admit.

For all his talk of being a good alchemist, he had forgotten the most important part of his journey: improvement.

“Hey,” Varian spoke softly, coaxing Yong to look up at him. “You made a mistake. It happens; believe me, I know better than most. You can’t go back and stop it from happening. All you can do now is apologize, learn from it, and move on. Okay?”

Varian could’ve sworn Yong had tears in his eyes. “Okay.”

Varian gently nudged his shoulder. “You know, your tendency towards fire actually seems pretty fitting for your personality. You’re friendly and shine bright, kinda like a firecracker.”

“Really?” Yong laughed, a tiny smile forming.

“Yeah,” Varian laughed. “Really.”

The rest of class passed without an incident or a catastrophic event to be seen.

“Hey Varian! I’ll carry this folder for you,” Yong said, grasping at the flimsy object.

“You really don’t have to do that,” Varian assured him.

“Nope, but I’m gonna!” Yong said, taking the folder from the desk. Unfortunately, he was holding it upside down, so all the papers inside spilled onto the floor. “Sorry.”

Varian sighed. “Just help me clean this up.”

Yong nodded, grabbing paper after paper. As he did, a voice from nearby snorted a laugh. Yong looked to see Hugo, Varian’s roommate (and mortal enemy? Yong wasn’t sure), standing by and having seen the whole exchange.

“What?” Yong asked.

“You are truly insufferable, kiddo,” Hugo smirked, but to Yong it almost looked like a smile. “You’re gonna go far in life.”

Despite the slight insult, Yong beamed. “You think so?”

“Sure,” Hugo said, already walking away.

“Well that was... nice, I guess?” Yong commented. “Where is he off to?”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” Varian said simply.

“What?!” Yong yelled. “You’re roommates! Don’t you talk about your days and stuff?”

“Nope,” Varian said with finality, ending that topic right there and then. If he was to keep setting a good example, then venting about his asshole roommate probably wasn’t the best way to close out the day.

After picking up the last of the papers, Varian grinned. “Ready to get moving?”

Yong nodded. “Lead the way, Varian!”

Thus, after Hexonomics (and Varian and Nuru’s extra class, Crownculus) Yong was brought to Madam Baba Yaga’s office.

The space was filled to the brim with magical items. Some glowing, some levitating, some even running around. Yong had heard once that Baba Yaga lived in a house that had giant chicken legs. If he did not believe it before, he definitely believed it now. The Madam herself was sitting on a floating stool, dealing with a myriad of other potions and papers in preparation for the next day’s courses.

Without looking at Yong, she spoke. “How was your first day shadowing a student?”

Yong fiddled with his sleeve. “It had its ups and downs. Sorry I started that fire in your classroom.”

Madam Yaga cracked out a laugh. “Don’t you get in a fluster, now. It isn’t the fire time something like that has happened. Do try not to make a habit of it.”

That got a nervous chuckle out of the boy.

“Although, I believe it’s a little late to say that.” Finally, the Professor turned to him, still floating slightly off the ground. “I read your file that the Land of Oz’s middle school sent us. You have quite a well documented tendency to use magic. Is this true?”

Yong knew she knew it was. He felt that lying would be a bad idea. “Yes, it is.”

The Madam hummed. She knew three things for certain: (1) This boy, like all the other non-magical students, would not be permitted to use magic outside a classroom. (2) One look at his record suggested that he would anyway; when he inevitably did, and possibly got expelled as a result, it would reflect badly not only on Ever After High, but the Moving-Up program as a whole. (3) If today was anything to go by, he was going to get himself seriously hurt if left unattended.

Madam Baba Yaga huffed. “I have a solution that may suit you.”

Outside the office, Varian and Nuru sat patiently.

“Thanks for waiting for him with me,” Varian said.

“Instead of leaving you to face the wrath of Yaga alone? I prefer my friends in one piece, thank you very much,” Nuru crossed her arms in mock-offense.

Varian smiled.

Then, the curtain door to the office swung open.

“I’m gonna be in Magicology with all of you!” Yong came running out, waving his paper class schedule around above his head.

“Woah!” Nuru exclaimed, equal parts excited for him and terrified for him to be in that class in reach of all that equipment again.

Varian’s mouth hung open. “How did you manage that?”

“Baba Yaga put me there herself! She said that she saw me try out that fire spell in class, and figured that if I was already doing magic enough to get it in one session, that I should at least know how to use it. Or else I might set myself on fire by accident once I’m made of straw,” Yong laughed. “Can’t be a future scarecrow if I’m all ash by then.”

“What a morbid thought,” Varian shivered.

“Well,” Nuru shrugged. “No better way to improve than to try again.”

Varian chuckled. “Ain’t that the truth!”

Yong’s whole heart felt light as a feather. “I think I’m gonna like it here. Now the school’s gonna have two Oz-destined students doing magic! Isn’t that fun!” He grabbed the young man’s arm. “Dorothy and Scarecrow. The ultimate duo!”

Varian’s chuckle turned nervous. “Yeah, about that...”

One explanation of Royals and Rebels later

“So yeah,” Varian smiled awkwardly. “I’m a Rebel.”

The gears turned slowly in Yong’s mind. Then, 3, 2, 1:

“What?!?!?”

Chapter End Notes

So, a scarecrow child, a literal embodiment of a shooting star, a farmer, and a sorcerer’s apprentice walk into a classroom.

Alternatively

Oz: “Wow this kid is destructive... Let’s make him Ever After’s problem.”

Hope y'all enjoyed this chapter! Kudos and comments are welcome. Remember to get some rest and DRINK LOTS OF WATER!!!

The Whole Truth (And Nothing Less)

Chapter Summary

When Hugo is accidentally stuck with a truth-curse. He must find ways to cope while also trying to get rid of it.

Chapter Notes

Hugo centric chapter let's gooooo!!! I love writing Hugo. He's pathetic and he's my favorite. Hope y'all enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“What do you mean I have to keep it?” Hugo whisper-shouted into his phone. Today, he had been ordered to wake up early and steal a particularly interesting item from the school’s storage rooms. Appearance wise, it resembled a marble, glass and multicolored, but about the size of a golf ball. Hugo, wearing his heavy duty gloves, without the fingerless sleeves he so loved, rolled it around his free palm as he spoke.

“There’s been a mix-up,” Cyrus said, simply. “Our pick-up guy can’t be there until later.”

Hugo certainly didn’t envy whoever made that mistake. Donella was all about efficiency. But that wasn’t his problem to solve right now. “Well, why can’t *you* come pick it up now?”

“That’s not relevant to you,” Cyrus said, gruff and monotone.

“Yeah, yeah,” Hugo huffed. “Well, I don’t have time to run back to my dorm and stash it—”

“Then keep it on you until we can get there. Hand it carefully and with gloves.”

Hugo hummed. “I heard Don for first time, thanks.” *But sure, both of you, don’t tell me why I need gloves for this thing. Real helpful.*

“Could’ve fooled me,” Cyrus muttered. Hugo wanted to say something back, but bit his tongue. “I’ll message you when someone can come get it. Got it?”

I got up early for this shit? Hugo sighed. “Got it.”

Then Cyrus hung up.

Such was another day in the life of Hugo Cast.

Breakfast was an enjoyable time for Hugo.

Being homeschooled most of his life (minus the month he spent at the Reform School after he completely blundered a job for Don), had always kept him busy. On top of the usual subjects his mother saw fit to teach him, those extra thieving jobs also took up a lot of his time. This left his social life largely void. He saw no reason to change that at this school, even if he did now have the time. As such, he usually spent his breakfast time watching people go about their day. From the higher section of the Castleteria, and a good distance from everyone, he could gleam so much about them all. And, for the most part, he was left alone.

“Morning Hugo!” Madeline Hatter ran by.

Hugo nodded to her. The election results for student council president had been strange. Both she and Apple White had decided to serve as Co-Presidents. Hugo didn’t see the point in it. If Apple White was going to be the future Queen, why should she share the high school equivalent with someone with no such destiny? Personally, he barely even considered her one of the Presidents.

“Morning Co-Pres,” Hugo said. But she was already gone. She ended up sitting at a table with Raven Queen. How they put up with each other, Hugo couldn’t understand.

From there it was the usual roster. Royal students in their frilly, overly bright outfits, Rebel students in their more varied styles. A student hiding behind a hood here, a student flying around with wings there. A nervous glance, a bashful look, a frown of contempt, a glare of annoyance; countless faces all with a day to begin and a story to live up to.

In the midst of it all, Hugo spotted his roommates' friends.

Bunch of weirdos. He paid them no heed.

From elsewhere, the sound of running turned his head.

And there goes Varian, at last, hair stuck through his goggles. The combination of that with the scrunched up expression on his face was certainly a sight to behold.

Hugo smiled remembering when he left the dorm this morning. Varian was still asleep, but woke up briefly.

“What time is it?” He didn’t even open his eyes.

Hugo eyed him cautiously, taking one last sip of his coffee, before finally saying: “Time to mind your business.”

“Ha. Fuck you.” Varian said, before promptly passing back out.

What a guy.

Pretty soon the bell rang. Class time.

Hugo noticed that his roommate hadn’t even had time to sit down, still holding a plate in his hands.

Disregarding that, Hugo stood from his table and returned his own dishware. As he walked towards the wide double doors of the Castleteria, he double-checked the contents of his bag. Everything was

accounted for; most important of all being the thing he stole. It didn't look so special at all, if he was being honest. Maybe keeping this marble-looking thing on his person wouldn't be so difficult?

Suddenly, someone collided with him, sending both them and himself to the ground. Consequently, his bag, still open, spilled its contents onto the floor.

In a flash, Hugo was shoving everything he could grab back into the book bag. His eyes scanned around, searching for the one thing that he couldn't afford to lose.

"I am so sorry! That was an accident," a voice chattered at him.

Hugo registered a student standing up in front of him, dusting herself off with her hands... wooden hands. cedar wood, to be exact.

Cedar Wood, the daughter of Pinnochio. A particular student who Hugo tried to avoid at all costs. Of all the students who could somehow find out about his thefts for Donella, Cedar would be the most disastrous. If she found out, she would rat him out, even if she didn't want to. This was because Cedar was cursed to never be able to lie.

"Are you hurt? I know bumping into wood can hurt." She glanced around, seeing the mess from the collision. "I'm gonna help you clean up."

"Don't do that!" Hugo all but tripped over himself to demand. But she was already helping gather. What made his panic worse was that he still had no idea where the marble landed. Her hand grabbed his bag, helping shove everything back into it. Still no marble in sight. Then:

"Oh," she said. "Is this yours too?"

In her hand, a golf-ball sized marble.

Panic overcame rationale. Only for a moment, he grabbed the marble from her open palm with his bare hand. As soon as it was back in his bag, his thoughts went ballistic. *Was it safe to do that? It was only for a second. Was it even safe for her to be holding it? Should wooden hands also be gloved too?*

"You're not hurt, right?" She asked.

Suddenly, he felt a strange, unreasonably strong chill run up his spine.

"I'm fine," Hugo breathed out. He looked down again, dusting himself off once more. His eyes fell on her hands, waiting for some kind of problem to arise because of the marble. Since he didn't know what to look for, though, this was difficult. Ultimately, he decided to stop staring, cause her hands were—

"What?" She asked, having noticed his staring.

Hugo felt the same chill from earlier all over again. "Your hands are a little creepy looking," Hugo said out loud, shocking himself. *Why did I say that? And what's with this chill?* He rubbed his own arm, trying to stay warm. "Hey, did you see an open window around here?"

Cedar opened her mouth to say something, but then stopped herself. An air of utter shock enveloped her, and a look of bafflement craving itself on her face. But, somehow, Hugo had a gut feeling she wasn't baffled at him, but at something else entirely.

Then, she walked off.

Oh well, Hugo had bigger fish to fry.

With a lingering sense of dread, Hugo double checked that the marble-like item was indeed returned to its place in his bag. He breathed a little easier after seeing that it was.

With any luck, that brief contact with it wouldn't have any negative consequences.

Hugo was in big trouble.

After breakfast, Hugo headed to Science and Sorcery class and got to work. He sat next to his roommate, as he had been doing more and more, if only because it was easier to tease him that way. Don may see people as distractions, but Varian was less of a distraction and more of a hobby. Something to keep Hugo motivated, even though he didn't feel threatened by him academically at all.

Yeah.

Today, they were doing a particularly complex experiment. So much so, apparently, that Goggles *still* had not fixed that messy hair of his; didn't even seem to know it was there. Hugo did his best not to focus on it, and he succeeded for most of class, but eventually, of course, he just had to say something. Truly, it was comparable to a bird's nest. The opportunity was too good to miss. Grinning, Hugo wondered gleefully how long he could keep the teasing going before he actually acknowledged the tornado on his head.

The blond rested his own cheek in his hand.

Varian's eyes flickered over to him, already annoyed. "What?" he asked.

Then, Hugo felt a chill down his spine. "Your hair is messy. You should fix it."

Varian blinked.

Hugo also blinked. *Why did I say that?* He shook himself. Well, that was a bust.

Varian took out his phone to check, grimacing at the image he saw. Quickly, he fixed himself, looking a bit more presentable. "Well, thank you, I guess?" he said like a question, hesitantly grateful.

Another chill. "You're welcome, Varian."

The freckled student was looking more and more weirded out. Hugo using his actual name? What was going on?

But that was nothing in comparison to how Hugo's head was spinning.

Why did I say that? I didn't mean to say that. This is— His thoughts stopped dead in their tracks. Hugo's face became pale.

With Varian still staring at him, Hugo jumped to his feet.

“Where are you going?” Varian asked, less out of curiosity and more out of perplexment.

Hugo turned to him. *Say the nurse, say the bathroom, say ANYTHING EXCEPT THE TRUTH.* He thought, trying to overpower what he was guessing this was. But the chill came.

“I’m going to call my kind-of boss and ask about—” Hugo covered his mouth with his hand, before all but sprinting out of the classroom, book bag in hand. While the Professor seemed to not care, sitting half asleep in his chair, Varian was laser focused.

What just happened? Varian thought.

Outside, Hugo listened to his phone ring. Cyrus picked it up at the sixth tone.

“Hugo, what’s wr—”

“I need you to tell me what this marble does!”

Cyrus went quiet. “What did you do?”

Chill. “I dropped it in the Castleteria and Cedar Wood picked it up bare handed, I’m not sure that’s the right term cause she’s got wooden hands but I think you get it, and I panicked and used my bare hands to take it back and now I think I can’t lie.”

“What did you just say?” Cyrus asked.

Hugo flinched as another chill appeared. He willed his mouth to stay shut, but it would not. “I said, I dropped it in the—” After restarting the whole sentence, he sighed in relief. He could hear Cyrus do the same.

“Listen to me carefully. The orb is a swapper. It transfers immovable magical qualities like curses. If a person with a curse touches it, the orb will absorb that curse out of them and into the orb, where it will release the curse onto the next person who touches it. When Cedar Wood touched it, the thing must have taken her curse. When you took the orb from her, you got that curse.”

“Okay, okay,” Hugo muttered. “I will fix this. I will.”

“I should hope so,” Cyrus sounded so tired. “Was that all?”

Hugo glanced around the hall. Chilled again, he spoke. “Yes. I’m gonna hang up now cause I really don’t want to talk to you about this anymore. Thank you for answering my question,” he breathed. “Don’t tell Mom.”

“Hugo—” Cyrus’ voice cut out as he cut the connection.

Hugo leaned against the wall, putting his hands on his knees and hunching over. He felt sick. “I’m going to die today.” That one was less a truth and more a dreadful fear.

I need to find Cedar Wood.

Suddenly, a nearby door swung open. Out stepped a very frustrated Cassandra.

Bingo.

Readjusting the bag on his shoulder, Hugo caught up to her.

“Cassandra?”

“Don’t talk to me.”

Hugo frowned. “Why?”

“I’m trying to cool off. Anger Magicment is a nightmare today.”

“I didn’t know you were in that class,” Hugo said. Then, he remembered seeing her fight in the joint-session of Damsel-in-Distressing and Hero Training. “Doesn’t surprise me.”

“Most people who know me aren’t either,” Cass said, glancing at him. “Why are you talking to me right now?”

Hugo winced. Chill again. “I need to find Cedar Wood. Do you know where to find her?”

Cass raised an eyebrow. “Do I want to know why you’re asking this?”

Hugo shook his head. Chill. “No, you don’t. And I don’t want to tell you so please don’t ask.”

The raven-haired student stopped in her tracks. “Okay, let me ask you something else.”

Hugo tensed. He debated running now. No matter the question, he would have to answer it. If he covered his mouth in time then maybe he could—

“Is Damsel-in-Distressing still a bore?”

Hugo sighed. Chill reappearing. “Yes. To me, it is.”

“Figured. Rapunzel says it’s fine but I don’t buy it. I took it last year, destiny-related for me, and hating every minute.”

“Your destiny is as a damsel? You don’t act like it.” Hugo was genuinely surprised.

“No, I do not.”

Then the bell rang, and students began filtering out of their classrooms.

“I don’t know where Cedar is, but if anyone does, it would be Raps, and I know where she is. My next class is her next class too.”

“What class?”

Fashion Design was a class that Hugo actually had some level of interest in. One of the skills Don had made sure he learned was basic sewing. Not that he really needed to learn it. Before he became her sorta-apprentice/adopted son, Hugo was very good at sewing. Well, good enough to get by.

Fashion itself did not bother him. He quite enjoyed a well put together outfit, and feeling of confidence and comfort it provided. He took enough pride in his appearance to dress deliberately (unlike the throw together, everything but the kitchen sink, farmer-fit that Goggles had going on).

But the class itself did not sit right with him. The frivolousness of a fashion design class for people like Rapunzel, rich, secure, promised a happily ever after their whole lives, who would never need to use these skills or suffer like he had, that bothered him.

So, despite his own personal interest, he never imagined himself walking into said class with the urgency he felt now. But, desperate times call for desperate measures.

The classroom itself was just about what he had been expecting: fabrics, sewing machines, design layouts, and (okay he didn't guess this next one) a giant push-pin board that read *Turquoise: Blueish Green or Greenish Blue* with two columns underneath containing numerous push-ins stabbed into them.

Everyone in the room was already busy working on their individual and group projects, so no one seemed to pay attention to himself or Cassandra. Despite all these loud sights and sounds, finding the student with a head of sunny blonde was not difficult. Even after they sat at her table, she didn't notice their arrival until Cassandra plopped her bag down onto the ground with a heavy thud.

"Cass!" Rapunzel looked up. When Rapunzel saw Hugo, she grew confused. "What are you doing here?"

"He's looking for Cedar," Cass said, at the same time as Hugo said, "I'm looking for Cedar," involuntarily, chill running through.

"Cedar Wood?" Rapunzel asked. Hugo winced but nodded frantically. She held her own chin in thought. "I'm not sure."

As she pondered the question, far too slowly for his liking, Hugo's eyes fell on the brightly colored fabrics she had laid out at her table. Most were smaller rolls, probably better fit for sleeves or frills to be added to a larger design. The largest roll of fabric was a soft, vibrant blue.

Rapunzel smiled. "Do you like it? I'm thinking of making a summer dress out of these."

"I'd have to see the final product," Hugo ran a hand along the seemingly endless wave of blue. It was very light and soft texture-wise. "If you added green it would be a nice accent."

"Dark green or light green?"

"Forest green," Hugo responded, motioning to his clothes. "I would know. It's kinda my color."

Rapunzel hummed. Without a word, she grabbed the fabrics and held them up to Hugo. She hummed again, comparing the shade combination in her head. She continued holding up fabrics until the other blond coughed.

"What's up?" she asked.

Hugo shifted where he stood. "I'm not a doll that you can just dress up, you know?" *Princesses are such a pain*, he thought, but was interrupted before the curse might have forced him to express the sentiment.

Rapunzel paused. "I know. I was just checking the— well, sorry, guess I should ask first."

"You should," Hugo said. "I didn't realize you were such a fashion-minded person in the first place."

Rapunzel snorted. "I'm really not. Give me something flowery, pastel, and shoe-less and I'm all set. However, considering my destiny is to be stuck in a tower for," her words faltered, "years, the school thinks it's important that I know how to make clothes and cook and do all the things a lady stuck alone would need to be able to do on her own."

"Oh, good idea," Hugo said plainly. What else was there to say to that? "At least you'll be fed and comfortable while you're up there."

Rapunzel sighed, just barely perceptibly, through her nose.

"Excuse me, young man," the Professor approached their table, making a face. "Are you a student in this class? I do not recognize you."

Now, normally, Hugo could come up with a good, if somewhat slapdash, lie. Regrettably, these were not normal circumstances. The chill returned. "No, I'm not a student in this class. I'm skipping Chemythstry right now."

The Professor, to their credit, seemed impressed at his honesty; a little speechless even.

Hugo still got a detention though. He was told to attend detention at the end of the day. In the back of his mind, Hugo knew that should worry him. That made two thus far in the year; one more and Donella would be called. But at this moment, there were more pressing matters.

Ultimately, Rapunzel did not know where Cedar would be, leaving Hugo up the creek without a paddle.

Unwilling to risk another detention, or stay in the company of that princess and wanna-be knight anyway, Hugo bit the bullet and attended Magicology. In doing so, he swapped out dealing with two insufferable friends of his roommate, for two OTHER insufferable friends of his roommate, as well as said roommate. Additionally, he decided not to press the subject of Cedar again. He would find her on his own. In the meantime, he couldn't afford to have a conversation that accidentally led to him spilling the beans on his thieving for Don, no matter how unlikely that was to happen.

Right as he sat down (keeping his mouth shut and his eyes forward), Hugo could tell that Goggles was staring at him. It wasn't the usual type of staring he did, which was one of annoyance and self-confidence and sometimes red with fury. No, this stare was analyzing him.

Hugo did his best to ignore it.

Then, Varian coughed. Hugo's green eyes flickered to his blue ones for a brief second, but in doing so he saw that the freckled student was smirking.

"Hey Hugo," Varian started.

Hugo rolled his eyes. *This ought to be good.* He thought, trying to hide any potential stress from reaching his face.

"Yes, Varian?"

"Why aren't you calling me Goggles, today?"

Hugo felt that increasingly familiar mental chill. “It’s not your name.”

“Very true,” Varian nodded.

“It is,” Hugo said, unconsciously adjusting his glasses.

“I was wondering where you were during Chemythstry. It’s very unlike you to miss class, as far as I’ve seen, especially one of your ‘destiny-oriented’ courses.” Varian re-adjusted his gloves, not looking at the blond student. “On top of this, you were acting very strange in Science and Sorcery. At first, I thought you were possessed. You were being way too nice for this to be normal. But then you did that thing where you covered your mouth, like it was moving without you meaning it to,” Varian paused, re-establishing eye contact. “Do you remember doing that?”

“Yes,” Hugo responded automatically, chill bothering him again. He was sure he looked like he was sweating bullets, or sitting on nails.

“Now, as an alchemist, I came up with a few conclusions, but the easiest way to figure out at least one of them is to ask,” Varian leaned closer to Hugo. “Can you lie?”

“No,” Hugo said, managing to grit his teeth as he spoke through them. It felt as difficult as trying to lift an elephant.

At his response, Varian’s grin grew cheshire cat-sized. “I knew it!”

“Knew what?” Yong joined the conversation. Nuru glanced at them all.

Varian laughed. “Hugo can’t lie. Am I right, Glasses?”

“He’s right,” Hugo said.

“What was that?” Varian smiled in mock-ignorance. “I couldn’t hear you.”

“You are right,” Hugo said, with the most vicious expression he could muster directed at Varian. At this, Varian sighed dreamily and Hugo suddenly wished another fire would start, so this conversation could finally end.

“Oh, okay,” Yong said, looking very excited. “I have a question!”

Varian held up a hand. “Hold it, kid. All joking aside, we don’t want to be jerks about this. We’re not Hugo,” that got a laugh out of the whole gang, minus Hugo. “Curses are serious things.” Then, Varian’s brows furrowed and he turned to Hugo. “This is a curse right?”

“Yes, obviously,” Hugo was barely able to add some sass to his statement of truth.

Varian turned back to Yong. “Is this a nice question?”

Yong nodded.

“I don’t believe this,” Hugo said. Yong’s smile fell, but he quickly regained it.

“Here’s my question: What’s your favorite color?” Yong beamed.

Hugo would have stumbled to answer, surprised at the genuineness in his voice, if the curse had let him. Instead, he answered immediately. "Green."

Yong laughed. "Nice. Mine is red."

"And mine is purple," Nuru added. "Okay, my turn."

Hugo crossed his arms.

"Why do you call me Practically-a-Princess?" Nuru asked.

Hugo scoffed as the chill down his spine reappeared. "Oh, that's easy. You have the prestige of a royal student. You even dress the part. Thus, you're basically a princess."

"Excuse you, aren't you also a Royal?"

Hugo held a hand over his heart in mock-defense, as his answer came with the curse. "I didn't pick the name. Besides, that's just related to how I feel about destiny. I'm not rich like you."

Nuru held up her hands, seemingly accepting defeat, or at least not up for arguing the point further. Yong giggled at them both. He himself was still debating the whole Royal vs Rebel thing, as far as Hugo was aware.

From next to him, Varian coughed. The other three turned to him. It was his turn to ask a question. Varian gave Hugo the once over. He seemed to consider a million different possible questions all at once.

Hugo felt the urge to bunker down like it was the end of the world, certain whatever his roommate asked would be either embarrassing or cruel.

Then, Varian's expression softened and he sighed. "How does the curse feel?"

Hugo nearly cried in relief. A non-incriminating question. "It feels like an invisible filter. I don't even think about it, it just happens. But I'm not being forced to say stuff unprompted, only if I'm asked. I just can't lie when actually asked."

Varian nodded, writing that down in his notebook. "Interesting. Do you think that has more to do with the curse itself or how it manifests in individuals."

"I'm not sure. It could be inherent to it," Hugo held his own chin. "Why do you ask?"

Varian chuckled. "It's not everyday you get to see the effects of a curse up-close. A good alchemist never misses an opportunity to learn from a direct source. Besides," Varian smiled, buck teeth and all. "All magic is interesting magic, right?"

"Right." *Wow.* "You should smile like that more often," Hugo said.

Varian looked up at him for a long moment. Hugo himself was quite perplexed as to where that comment came from in his brain. Why had he said that? Luckily, Varian didn't ask. Instead, he ducked back down to his notebook and frantically, while muttering, scrambled to write something down.

Suddenly, a booming voice echoed from the front of the lecture hall. “No distracting the other students!”

A chorus of ‘sorry’s sounded off from the four students.

Thankfully, the rest of class was free of any more questions being thrown Hugo’s way.

Lunch was a disaster.

Hugo had hoped the Castleteria, with its wide array of students, and the where he last saw Cedar, would be the place to find her. This led to Hugo being pulled into far too many conversations for his liking, since he couldn’t just ignore the questions. None led to him revealing why he was looking for Cedar, but they were no less unenjoyable.

In the end, Cedar was nowhere to be found.

The whole period was so aggravating, it almost made him happy to move on to Damsel-in-Distressing class.

Almost.

Currently, he was stuck in one of the training towers with Rapunzel, being taught a lesson in patience. Yeah, cause he *really* needed to learn that.

If he could use sarcasm right now, he would have said that aloud.

“This breeze is just what I needed,” Rapunzel said. “Cooking Class-ic was incredibly stuffy today.”

Hugo shifted further away from the window as she continued to lean further and further out of it; no fear evident in her face.

She noticed his discomfort. “You okay?”

A chill, not from the air, ran through him. “No. I don’t know how you can be so calm being so high up,” Hugo said.

Rapunzel took his comment in stride. “It wasn’t always easy for me either. Exposure is the best way to overcome it. I’ve had a lot of it my whole life. Prep for my destiny.”

“But it’s worth it in the end,” Hugo added, no curse required. “Happily ever after, and all.”

Rapunzel’s smile waned. “That’s a subjective term.”

If Hugo had something coherent to say to that, he would have said it. He didn’t really have a choice. However, her statement left him perplexed to the point of blank mindedness. Subjective? What could be subjective about living happily and safely, for the rest of your life? That’s what he had waiting for him, and there was nothing subjective about that. He would work for Donella, become the Sorcerer, and be kept out of poverty. That was the deal destiny offered.

“Hey,” Rapunzel put a hand on his shoulder, examining his expression with a look of concern. Hugo sucked in air sharply, terrified she would ask him a question. “Just, try to not look down.”

He could tell she wasn’t referring only to the heights. Hugo stared at her. “So you’re a Rebel?”

Rapunzel nodded slightly. “Me, and most of my friends.”

“Like Varian.”

“Oh, Varian especially. An alchemist like him could never be pulled away from all that. Could you imagine?”

A chill down his spine, Hugo tried to bury any upcoming words. “Not really. He’s so smart, but so stupid. He’s got a decent destiny. I don’t get why he would want to rebel?”

Rapunzel smirked. “You think he’s smart?”

Hugo managed to cover his mouth before the chill could force any words out. Not that he expected them to be embarrassing at all. The answer was probably just a ‘not at all’. He wasn’t sure why he panicked so suddenly. It’s probably just been a long day. Yeah.

Hexonomics came and went with, mercifully, silence. No questions for Hugo to answer. Despite this, it felt like the longest class of the day.

This was because Cedar was there. Hugo could see her, sitting a few rows ahead. The Professor spent the whole class lecturing them on the recent chapters of their textbook, and he demanded total silence while doing so. Thus, Hugo was forced to sit and wait until the end of the session to try and rid himself of this stupid curse.

Although, he did not acknowledge to himself that getting her to take back the curse would be difficult, since he could not lie to do so. Honestly, the chances were slim that she would honestly want it back at all. He certainly wouldn’t.

“What’s your issue?” Varian asked, eventually noting his roommate’s clear distress.

Hugo covered his mouth. He wasn’t giving Freckles any more leg room today, thank you very much.

Varian huffed, but didn’t press the subject.

As with all things, time did pass and class finally ended. When it did, Hugo made a beeline for Cedar.

As he approached her, trying to mentally recite what few words he had decided to start off with, she took one look at him and spoke first. “You have my curse, don’t you?”

Hugo felt himself shiver. “Yes,” he said through a muffled hand. He nodded too, just to be clear.

“Um,” She glanced around. “Let’s take a walk.” Hugo followed her lead. In the back of his mind, he acknowledged that this was the direction he was planning on going anyway, to detention. Yippee.

One problem at a time.

“So,” Cedar started to say. “I would ask how this happened, but I already know how it feels to be asked questions when you have that curse, so I won’t.”

He almost couldn’t believe her. If he was in her shoes, he would take the opportunity to learn every detail of how this happened, why, and who was to blame. Especially who was to blame. But, strangely, he trusted that even without a curse being used on her, she was being truthful. Maybe it was a force-of-habit for her. The look she gave was hard to decipher; her face was made of wood for goodness sake! But, something in Hugo’s gut said it was a look of empathy. A rare thing, in his experience. Funny that it came from someone who could destroy his life at this moment if she decided to.

Finally, they reached the door to the detention hall. Cedar stopped there before he could.

“I have detention,” she groaned.

“I do too,” Hugo said. “I skipped class trying to find you. I couldn’t find you at lunch,” he said, shifting gears just in case this supposed goodness changed, still trying to find a way to ask her to take the curse back.

“Yeah, I’ve been busy,” Cedar sighed. “Once I realized my curse was just, poof, gone, I spent the day righting some wrongs. I’ve told a few too many secrets in the past, and I wanted to try and set them right. But now that they are,” she trailed off. Then she asked, “How do we switch it back to me?”

Hugo blinked. “You want it back?”

Cedar paused. She took a deep breath, perhaps savoring that she now had that luxury before she answered. “Please trust me, I’m being honest here. Sometimes, I don’t think of it as a curse. It can be nice, not keeping secrets, mine or anyone else’s. Plus, I have found ways to manage.”

“Such as?” Hugo was skeptical. “All that’s helped me is just covering my mouth with my hand.”

Cedar shrugged. “Most often, I just chew on something crunchy, like pretzels, so my words are all garbled up.”

“Doesn’t that come with a choking risk?”

Cedar’s expression became glazed over. She waited, once again savoring the suspense her silence created. Then, she laughed. “Sorry, I never get to do that; not answer a question to be funny. For real, though, I am made of wood. I can’t choke.”

“Oh, right.”

“In any case,” Cedar shuffled her feet on the cold hallway floor. “It’s still my curse. I’m not going to force anyone else to have it,” She tried to sound nonchalant.

“That’s noble, but I don’t believe you,” he said.

Cedar just stood there. This clearly wasn’t easy for her.

Tough, but that wasn’t Hugo’s problem.

Another chill appeared. At least, that's what it felt like.

"I'm sorry. This isn't fair to you. I really am sorry," he said. Even he was surprised that the curse let him say that. Was that really how he felt?

Cedar looked up, her wooden face etched with surprise too.

"I believe you," she said. With that, Hugo handed Cedar the marble. As she held it in her wooden hands, an invisible weight lifted from Hugo's shoulders. He inhaled and exhaled slowly, feeling like he was taking in fresh air for the first time in hours. Carefully, and with gloves this time, he took back the marble and tucked it away.

Detention was a silent session. However, once it was over, Cedar said: "Maddie always says you're sitting alone in the Castleteria in the morning. Should we get breakfast together sometime?"

He almost said yes. "I'd rather not."

If today had taught him anything, it was that the other students would make it harder for him to stay on task. His priorities were still his destiny, Donella, and getting to Legacy Day in one piece. Making friends could come later, if ever.

After detention, once he returned to his dorm, Hugo unpacked his school supplies, made sure Olivia had charged during the day, and collapsed onto his bed. Beside him, Varian was making some late-day coffee for himself. "Goggles, in exchange for the info you gained from my temporary curse, I demand you pour me a cup too."

Varian went wide eyed. "You said Goggles. Is the curse gone?"

Hugo stared up at him, quiet for a very long time, long enough to get the point across on its own. However... he wanted to hammer it home anyway.

"Goggles," he got up and leaned against the desk. "Have I ever told you how much I adore you? You're the light of my life, my reason for living, my angel, my—"

"Okay, okay, I get it, you can lie again." Varian shoved him away, hard enough (though Hugo wasn't trying to fight it) that the taller student fell back onto his own bed.

Hugo smirked. There was that face of fury he loved to cause. "And no one's more happy about it than I am."

Varian stared into the empty air. "On that much, we agree." Disdain was obvious in his voice.

In a perfect world, to Hugo at least, that would have been the end of that (aside from the dread of wondering if Cyrus told Don about the call earlier). Though, of course, with an annoyingly persistent roommate like Freckles over there, the world was far, far away from being perfect.

Out of the silence, Varian spoke up. "Hey, that kind of thing, a curse like that. That's pretty powerful stuff. You would need a conduit to be given that. Either through another person or an object. So, what did—"

Hugo stared at Varian, trying to hide his own caution; caution entailed reason to be nervous, and the blond knew well how to avoid suspicion. "Goggles, you should know by now: your business and

your business and my business is mine,” Hugo fully settled onto his own bed, closing his eyes and trying to rest, if only for a little while.

“Right,” Varian mumbled. “Right.” His eyes lingered on Hugo, unsatisfied by the answer. An alchemist’s mind never rests, after all.

Finally, Hugo heard a *ding* from his phone. The message read:

Pick up. Bridge by the pond.

Without a word, he dragged himself to his feet, slung his bag back over his shoulder, and left. No time to waste. The sooner this malicious marble was gone, the better. Hugo was more than done with giving people the whole truth. Partial ones would do just fine.

Chapter End Notes

Hope y’all enjoyed! Sprinted to finish this asap cause y’all may not get a new chapter for a bit. Life is about to hit like a truck and I gotta take care of business. But you know what? Fuck it we ball. Speaking this into the universe: you are all going to have a great day!

IF YOU ARE READING THIS GO DRINK WATER RIGHT NOW!!!

Testing

Chapter Summary

While awaiting the results of their most recent test, Varian and Hugo get caught up in their individual stress. But, more than just test-stress sits on their minds.

Chapter Notes

Hello summer! Hope everyone is having a great day, a great week, and a great overall start to summer! (I know technically it's not summer yet but when June hits I just consider it summer). Hope y'all enjoy the new chapter.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“Pencils down!” Professor Rumpelstiltskin commanded. Giving only a moment for the pencils to hit the table, he waved his hand and flew the papers to him. In no time at all they shuffled themselves into a stack that the professor then locked them away in a small cabinet under the desk.

“You may all go now. Results will be returned to you in a few days.”

Hugo sighed as he cracked his fingers. He rolled his shoulders, unclenched his jaw, and stretched his legs. Normally, the blond was not worried about these things, especially on a simple Chemythstry test like this. He had it down to a science (literally). He had been through this sort of thing before, during homeschooling and otherwise, and he was confident he would get one of, if not *the* best grade. Nothing to worry about.

But, with Legacy Day inching closer and closer, he knew Don would want to hear about these things. Plus, she had been sending him on quite a few jobs after his foot healed. He hoped if he got them all done, and still got the best grade on his test (as he often did), she would let up a little. It was a stupid thing to hope for. But still, it had wormed itself into his mind, so he was willing to humor the thought.

So, he put in a little extra elbow grease to study for this one. He figured he did adequately. Probably the best in the class.

For no particular reason, his eyes shifted to look at his roommate.

On Varian's face was a relieved smile. It was easy to decipher. One of those post-stress smiles. But, that didn't seem to be all there was to it, something less straightforward.

Didn't catch Hugo's attention.

After he'd packed up his book bag, Hugo rushed to match Varian's pace as he exited the classroom. Catching him by surprise, Hugo flicked the bandana around his neck up in his face. In the same breath, he swiped one of the pens from the freckled student's bag, twirling it around in plain sight.

"Think you did any good on that test, Goggles?" The blond asked, with a fair amount of bite to it.

The smile on the shorter student's face disappeared, replaced by a scowl in the taller student's direction. "Yes, I think I did, Glasses. Sorry to disappoint."

Hugo raised an eyebrow. "Now, why would I be disappointed by that?"

Varian smirked. "Because you have competition, for once."

Hugo felt an uncomfortable sting in his chest. "Delusional as always, farm boy."

Varian managed to smile, but it did not reach his eyes. "Guess these test results will be a good indicator of how 'delusional' one of us is." Varian plucked the pen out of Hugo's hand. "Your highness."

Hugo glared back. "Yeah, guess so."

The two stared each other down. Almost the entire way to the Magicology classroom.

Did this cause them to run into several students in the hallway? Yeah, but don't worry about it.

By the time they had reached their next class, the relief of finishing the test vanished from Varian quite suddenly and without warning. The conversation with Hugo didn't help, but somehow he knew that wasn't the reason for the change. Regardless of its cause, Varian was now completely fixated on the stress of wondering what grade he got on that test.

The next few days went something like this...

Once again, it was a beautiful day at Ever After High. All around the Castleteria, the sun was shining through the giant glass windows.

Not that Varian noticed it. He was too busy stewing and muttering away in his stressed-out state.

"Okay, if I got question forty-one right, and the extra credit, even if I did manage to get questions sixteen and nineteen wrong, I would still have gotten—"

"Varian? You're writing on my napkin." Rapunzel said, ever so gently.

Varian looked up at his friend. Then, back down at the napkin. He was indeed writing on it, transcribing most of what he had just been rambling about. Throwing out a regretful smile, he slowly set down his pen; didn't fully put it away though.

As the conversation at the table continued, Varian almost found himself letting his stress fade to the back of his mind.

Almost.

Oh no, what about question twenty? Could the confusion of nineteen have caused me to fumble that one too? It was about—

A lull in the talking appeared, but it was quickly filled up again by Nuru. “Hey, did you hear about Raven Queen? She—”

The stress re-spiked.

“I need to go.” Varian stood up quickly and left.

“Where are you going?”

“Library! I need to double check some things!”

Cassandra raised an eyebrow. “What’s up with him?”

Rapunzel took a bite of her lunch. “Testing in chemythstry.”

Eugene winced. “Doesn’t he have that class with Hugo?”

“Olivia I’m fine,” Hugo whispered to the robotic mouse as he tried to set her back down onto the desk. During lunch, he had decided to run back to his dorm room to check on her, figuring that she might be lonely with only a racoon to keep her company.

Definitely wasn’t feeling a little overtaxed mentally and needed his friend. No way.

Only now, Olivia seemed determined to stay with him and not remain in the dorm.

“Stop acting like a therapy dog. You’re a mouse, and I’m fine,” Hugo insisted, setting her back down.

She did not look convinced.

The consequence was that Olivia decided her new home was Hugo’s jacket pocket. And it wasn’t a vacation home, no matter how many times he tried to get her to stay put in the dorm.

Eventually, he just gave up.

Admittedly, it was nice to have her with him in Damsel-in-Distressing, as he spent his time zoning out and thinking back to the test. Both were unpleasant, but if he had to pick his poison he would pick the science-related one any day of the week. Even if it did lead to thinking about how awful it would be if a certain blue hair streaked roommates somehow did get a better grade. Ugh, Hugo could already picture it. The shorter young man would be smug for days, he just knew it.

Well, only if that actually became a reality. Which it wouldn’t.

Some of the test questions were a bit harsh this time. Number nineteen and twenty especially were really—

“So, how do you think you did on that test?” Rapunzel asked, off handedly, nearly scaring Hugo out of his skin. He had been so lost in thought, calculating and re-calculating his possible score that he had for a moment forgotten where he was.

How does someone that unassuming manage to be even a little scary?

How does she even know about the test anyway?

Oh, right.

“Varian mentioned it, didn't he?” Hugo asked, unamused.

Rapunzel nodded.

“Of course he did.” Hugo slumped into his arms. Would he never be free of his roommate? Even in the ONE CLASS they didn't have together?

Rapunzel whistled. Hugo looked back up at her with a small preemptive frown.

“When I'm under pressure, I usually try to turn to my best friend.”

Hugo gave her a deadpan look. “I don't think our friend circles overlap.”

Ignoring him, Rapunzel nudged her dress pocket. Out crawled a small green chameleon. “This is Pascal! I believe you've only met briefly, and at that point he was blue,” she laughed.

Hugo eyed the pet, who seemed to eye him right back, almost looking suspicious of him.

From his own pocket, Olivia popped out. The chameleon's demeanor turned far more friendly at the sight of her.

Rude.

Rapunzel giggled. “Aw, they're friends.”

“I wouldn't say that,” Hugo said, before Olivia fully jumped out of his pocket, landed next to Pascal, and made herself comfortable with the princess.

“Et tu, Liv?” Hugo whispered, feigning betrayal.

Clearly, his robotic mouse would never get a therapy animal license.

Per the suggestion of some of his friends (translation: the non-negotiable urging of Rapunzel), Varian took the time to visit the Wonderland Haberdashery and Tea Shoppe. Normally, he was content to get warm drinks from the coffee maker in his dorm room. Or, if he was in more of a hurry, he would get a significantly less high quality, but passable cup from the Castleteria. That, combined with his workload from classes, meant he did not often have the time nor the motivation to go out for a cup of coffee, let alone tea.

But, the place was not half bad. Plus, it was good for distracting himself from the looming test results.

And the upcoming—

“Here’s your order,” Maddie Hatter set a cup down in front of him.

Varian smiled up at her. “Thanks,” he smiled, not quite matching her energy.

Then, she gasped.

Varian raised an eyebrow. “What?”

Maddie grinned. “We have the same color blue in our hair!” She gestured to her head. Indeed, most of her curly hair was blue, with some streaks of fuschia purple, and even a few small lines of black and white.

“I guess we do,” Varian chuckled, fiddling his own hair, blue streak and all.

“It’s just funny. The shape of the stone knows not to roam, but the wish of the fish is a whole other dish,” Maddie said, laughing.

Varian blinked. “What?”

“Oh nothing,” she smiled, before running back to the kitchen.

The freckled student sat perplexed for a moment, before he shook himself off his stupor.

Must have been Riddlish. He thought, taking a spit from the tea cup in his hand. *I really should learn a few phrases, especially with all the Wonderlandian students here. It might come in handy.*

Then, his brain did what it did best and turned back to the object of its strain.

Oh no, there wasn’t any Riddlish on that test right? No, no there couldn’t have been. Professor Rumpelstiltskin doesn’t even know Riddlish!

Varian frowned.

Right?

The student was so caught up in his thoughts, he did not even notice the nearly one hundred clocks around him about to hit noon.

Does Hugo know Riddlish? Knowing my luck he probably—

His thoughts were cut short by the blindingly loud noise of all the surrounding Cuckoo Clocks sounding off the start of the hour.

Hugo was in trouble.

He was pretty sure by now that he didn’t get the extra credit question on the test. It was a tough one, so he doubted anyone else did either, but still! Also, he was barely focusing on Magicology, and rambling to someone he didn’t even consider his friend. But that's besides the point.

Next to him, Nuru re-examined the solution. Magicology didn't use chemicals that often, but today was one of those days. The professor had set them all up in pairs. Needless to say, she got the short end of the stick.

"Beaker," Nuru motioned to her lab partner to hand it over.

Hugo handed it over. "I mean, it really wasn't that difficult a test. Just, wordy."

"Hugo," she sighed. "I really don't care."

The blond smiled. "And this is why I talk to you."

"I care!" Yong jumped into the conversation.

"I know," Nuru and Hugo both said, making the boy smile.

Nuru motioned for him to hand her the next substance, which he did, as Hugo continued to rant about the test. He wasn't much help in the remainder of the process. Still, Nuru and Yong got the job done.

Ruddiger was minding his own business, lazily swatting at a grape.

Varian was staring into space for a while, fidgeting with his own hands. Then, he looked down at his fuzzy friend.

"Ruddiger," Varian started. "I am a man of science. Please remember that. Now, I need you to predict the future for me. For science."

The freckled student opened both his palms in front of the racoon.

"Tap my right hand if I did better than Hugo. Tap my left hand if not."

Ruddiger stared at both hands. In doing so, he let the grape fall to the floor. Immediately, he turned around and jumped off the bed to follow it.

Varian let his own head fall into his hands. "Results inconclusive."

Hugo really didn't take walks outside often enough. Cyrus had been telling him that for years. He was pale as a ghost and skinny like a twig, always had been (especially when Don first adopted him), so some fresh air would do him good. That's what he'd said, anyhow.

The Enchanted Forest that surrounded half the school, providing a good means to finally put that to action. So, here Hugo was. Walking around. It was with some hesitation that he had to admit, it was kind of alright. Didn't help with the stress too much, but at least the scenery was nice.

On top of walking, he was also getting some work done, because he could multitask like that.

Hugo held his phone to his ear. Cyrus was going on about the properties of the next object Don wanted him to nab. Somewhere between Cyrus calling it "mostly stable" and "extremely fragile",

Hugo zoned out. His thoughts had returned once more to the test results. He tried to subdue the growing anxiety it was causing him. Really, it was a very inconsequential thing. Whether he did good or great (there was no question that it was at least a good grade), his grades in the course were good enough to cover any minor scraps.

Hugo didn't *need* to get the best test score. But——

Hugo heard his name. He shook himself, hearing it again.

“Hugo, are you listening?”

The blond forced a smile, even though no one was going to see it. The act was good for making the tone convincing. “Yep, yeah totally.”

“Hugo,” Cyrus said, almost concerned. “Are you really listening?”

“I am. I’m fine,” he lied. “Just been waiting a while for some test results.”

“I thought we already got you tested for rabies?”

Hugo blinked. “Was that a joke?”

“No,” Cyrus coughed. “Don’t let the stress affect your other work.”

Hugo knew he meant school *and* the jobs. “Yeah, got it.”

Cyrus hummed. “I’ll call you soon.”

“Wait!” Hugo said, regretting it immediately, but not one to be a quitter. He was suspicious though. Just a bit. “Can you do me a favor and check under my old bed?”

Silence on the other end. Hugo half assumed Cyrus had hung up and he just hadn’t noticed. Then, shuffling. “I’m here. What am I looking for?”

Hugo’s mouth fell open, his voice almost lagging in his surprise. “Is there a marble still half stuck in the floorboard?”

“Yeah.”

The blond let out a breath of relief. Then, Cyrus spoke again. “No, sorry, that’s a dust ball. The marble looks to be in the corner.”

Hugo let his head hang down. “Figured. Thanks.”

Mercifully, Cyrus did not ask what that was all about. It would have been a little embarrassing to have to explain that he used to think that the marble’s location could predict the future. It was like his version of astrology. It didn’t matter. His luck was still good.

Test or no, his life was about to improve forever in just about a week.

Varian was hitting the training dummy in Hero Training like it was a mortal enemy. Not that it was helping him relax. Seemed like nothing was helping with that at the moment.

“Dude,” Cass said, standing nearby with her own dummy. She had a feeling she knew what was going on with him. “You need to calm down.”

“That is—” Varian let the sharp end of the wooden sword in his hands slump to the ground. “—the number one worst thing you could say to someone in crisis!”

“No, I could do worse.”

“You mean ‘say worse’?”

“Nope.”

Varian groaned. “Just let me stew in peace.”

Cassandra rolled her eyes, scoffing slightly at her friend’s antics. “There’s bigger things to worry about in the near future than whatever grade you got on a test.”

Varian went quiet. Very quiet. Like he was acting as though he didn’t hear her.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she continued. “What you’re *actually* thinking about; not some test that you probably aced anyway.”

Varian said nothing. And he didn’t plan to in response.

Cass saw through this, and understood. She dropped the subject. *He can cope however he likes, I guess.* “Want me to fake injure you so you can leave? Would that help?”

Slowly, Varian began to nod.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Cassandra readied a swing of the wooden sword in her hand.

“Wait,” Varian asked, mid-swing, “You did say fake injury right?”

The nurse certainly didn’t think it was fake. A little magic did the trick though.

Finally, news came.

At the end of class, as the bell rang, Professor Rumpelstiltskin shouted over the sounds of shuffling feet and moving chairs. “Your tests will be returned to you by tomorrow. My scores are final.”

Logically, this information should have lessened the roommates’ mutual distress in their waiting game.

It did not.

Later that night, very late, a theory had popped into Varian’s mind. At first, he had shaken it off simply as nerves, or perhaps even spite. But the more he thought it over, the more convinced he

became that it might be true.

Varian knew he'd done better on the test than Hugo. He was so sure of it. He'd studied hard, put in the work and dedication. He had to have done better.

Varian stared down at the pen in his hand; the one Hugo had stolen a few days earlier.

He gripped it a little too tight.

The professor would have already graded them by now. But the results were just going to sit there overnight. Someone could tamper with them. Someone capable of thieving.

Well, Varian wasn't going to sit around and let that happen.

Varian slammed his textbook shut. Taking out his Mirrorphone, Varian opened the groupchat he had going with Eugene and Lance. He typed rapidly.

I need your help. It won't involve anything illegal, but it is going to go against school rules. We're gonna take a look at some test results.

Following this, he layed out the basics of the plan forming in his mind to them.

After a few minutes, during which Varian could only guess what Eugene and Lance were thinking, Lance back messaged first.

Are you sure you wanna do that?

Varian stared at the screen. Eugene's bubble kept appearing and disappearing and reappearing. He was definitely flipping back and forth between some words of discouragement. Whatever he was going to say, he was probably right. Varian knew that.

Regardless, he messaged back.

Yes, I'm sure.

Eugene took a little while, but he eventually sent a single message.

You're lucky you're our favorite nerd.

As Varian messaged them, working out the logistics of the plan, his roommate on the opposite bed attempted to nap; or just plain old pass out. Unfortunately, the robotic mouse on his head was determined to prevent sleep from taking hold of him.

“Olivia,” he whined. “Bestie, I’m begging you, let me rest.” He moved her to her charging station.

The robo-rodent stared at him for a moment, before promptly jumping back to his head. *Where would I be without you Liv?* Hugo thought behind his frown. Still, he really wanted to sleep. Can’t worry if you’re asleep.

Plus, there were only a week of sleeps left to get through before—

“I’m going to study in the library tonight,” Varian said, a little too loud, and a little too suddenly. “I’ll probably be there late, so don’t wait up.” Varian stood, stiffly.

Hugo raised an eyebrow. “Okay?”

Varian’s eyes shifted. “Yep. Bye.” He grabbed his bag and rushed out the door.

In the silence that followed, Hugo came to a realization like a person looking in a mirror and realizing they have a face. It was pretty obvious, especially for someone who’s been a thief most of his life (and was thinking about the option anyway).

This little shit is going to take the results!

Hugo hummed to himself, a little stunned, before laying back in his bed. He already thought about trying it. But, he figured the odds of getting caught weren’t worth the risk (the risk being the wrath of Don. He still shivers remembering how mad she was when he got caught in a theft years ago).

I hope Goggles enjoys getting caught. He thought, with no small amount of satisfaction.

Then, an idea struck him.

Then again, I guess I could use the warm up. Maybe a quick personal mission would help me get rid of this tension! And, I suppose it doesn’t hurt to be extra sure that I am the best. Not that I would really need the confirmation.

Slowly, Hugo stood, grabbed his bag and jacket, and headed out of the dorm.

Varian met Eugene and Lance at the door to the Chemystery room. The duo had arrived a few minutes before the freckled student, allowing them some time to examine the closed entrance and prepare for any possible roadblocks to their plan.

Luckily, there didn’t seem to be any.

“No traps? Security measures? Seems too good to be true,” Varian asked.

Lance held his chin, an expression of faux-seriousness. “Yeah,” the expression fell to one of mirth. “Or, it’s exactly as good as it looks. It’s a classroom, not a bank vault.”

Eugene shook his head. “Never be too careful.”

“Only one way to find out,” Varian moved forward, opening the door. Before he could step inside, however, a tug at his collar pulled him back.

“Not happening,” Eugene said, a nervous tone seeping into his voice. “It’s unlocked. That makes me think the problems for us are waiting inside, not out.”

Varian frowned, stuttering with indignation. “What do you suggest we do, then?”

Without a word, Eugene took out a ball of yellow yarn. He knelt to the ground, holding the object like a small bowling ball. He threw it like one too, allowing it to roll across the ground and beyond the threshold of the door.

“Does Rapunel know you’re using the yarn she bought you, for knitting, for this?” Lance asked.

“She didn’t buy me the yarn,” Eugene pouted. “She only bought me the gift card to Yarns and Noble. There’s a difference.”

After a minute, no alarms seemed to sound off; nor any traps. Satisfied, Eugene signaled for the group to enter. As expected, no traps. Still, Varian’s friends didn’t look too thrilled to be there.

“Okay, check the scores and let’s get out of here!” Lance whispered.

Varian made a beeline for the desk, finding the cabinet below to be unlocked, just like the door. He went to flip through the stack of paper to find his own, but then he stopped, setting down the pages.

“Maybe we can just, I don’t know, tuck the tests away somewhere. Why break the suspense? I mean, who *really* wants to know what they got on a test anyway?” Varian tried to laugh, but it came out more like a dying noise.

Eugene looked at his friend, confused. “But you said you wanted to know what the scores are? That way you’ll know the truth, especially if someone tries to change them.”

“Yeah,” Varian said slowly. “But…” he trailed off. “Have you ever heard of Schrödinger’s Cat?”

Eugene grew even more confused. “I don’t know anyone with that name, let alone their cat.”

“Me neither,” Lance called, looking out the door to make sure they were in the clear.

“No, it’s not a real cat, it’s a thought experiment. There’s a cat in a box and you don’t know if the cat is alive or dead until you open it. So, metaphysically, it’s both alive and dead at that moment,” Varian practically talked with his arms from how much he was motioning around. “This test is my cat.”

“Hey, in your words, ‘only one way to find out!’ Open the box, read the papers,” Lance said to him, stepping away from the door and towards his friends.

“But what if I didn’t do as well as I could have! What if I didn’t—”

“Do better than Hugo?” Lance said.

Eugene directed a look of exacerbation at Varian. “Oh please don’t tell me *he’s* what this is all about.”

Varian stuttered. "I- I wasn't going to say that."

Both other students gave him a look that read clearly as the words "be for real".

Varian crossed his arms.

Eugene let out a long breath.

"Varian. Let's just go," he said.

"No!" The freckled student yelled, before being shushed quietly by the other two.

"I just need to know." Varian said, quieter.

"You should already know that you're better than Hugo. I should know, he's the worst. You aren't the worst," Eugene said.

Lance raised his hand. "I second that statement."

"No, I'm not talking about that," Varian began to pace around the room.

"Then what? What do you need to know?" Lance asked.

"I don't know," Varian said, unconvincingly.

"Varian!" Eugene's patience was wearing thin.

Varian's face flickered through many emotions all at once. Most prevalent of all was terror. "I need to know that I could've done it! If destiny didn't exist, I could've done what he is destined to do, but even better! I know I could, I just need... I just."

"Varian," Eugene said again, softer this time.

Varian's hand went up to his goggles. He held them with his gloved hands like they were about to fly off his head. Then, he spoke.

"Legacy Day's in a week."

Eugene pulled the shorter student into a hug, which Lance joined in a moment later. Both his friends' presences gave Varian something to focus on, something to ground himself.

"I know," Eugene said. Not much else he could say for Varian's case.

"If it helps, you're not the only one who's dreading Legacy Day," Eugene said. "It's not really a dream of mine to be some rich guy's body-double. Plus, I worry about what'll happen between Rapunzel and I after we sign. She'll have to fall for her future rescuer, and I already know that can't be me."

"It's not right." Lance stated. "And I admit, even with my future status, I don't know that I want it. I like being Lance Midas. I don't want to give that up to be known only as King Midas. I want to be me."

Varian thought his legs might not hold him up if the hug ended. looked at the floor. “You both deserve better.”

“Yeah, you too.”

The duo before him went silent. Eventually, the hug broke apart.

“Hey, we still have a week,” Eugene said.

Varian nodded.

“Guess it’s a bit easier to stress over a test than over signing the Storybook,” Lance stated.

“Yeah, it is,” Varian forced himself to admit. To get it out of his soul before it made itself a home there. “Forget the test. Let’s just go.”

His friends nodded.

Someone else, one foot just barely over the line into the room at the other door, decided to stop listening and leave too.

From the opposite door to the one the trio entered through, Varian heard a shout of surprise, a lightning fast shuffling, and a sudden running of footsteps. In the trio’s panic, they could not discern whether the steps were coming closer or further away.

“Move, move, move,” Lance ushered the group back towards the door they used, on the other side of the room. Unfortunately, in doing so, they were caught in a trap of their own.

“Ugh, what is this?!” Eugene exclaimed.

“It’s,” Varian started to say, but stopped as he examined the trap they were caught in more closely.

In terms of traps, it wasn’t a particularly flashy one. Or more accurately, it was more of a shiny one. It was a crystallization trap, a small one, but strong nonetheless, encasing all three pairs of feet up to the calves. Lucky for them it wasn’t painful to simply be stuck in, but it DEFINITELY would be if they tried to remove their feet from it (if they even *could* do that). Varian tried not to think about the possible blood, willing himself to keep his dinner from reappearing in his throat.

That was not what held Varian’s attention, though. He and his friends had walked right through this door mere minutes ago with no issue. So how...

Varian slowly began to smile. “Genius! A trap that doesn’t go off until the perpetrators attempt to leave the room they weren’t supposed to be in! Ha! I should’ve thought of that.”

“Yeah, yeah that’s great,” Lance stressed. “But how do we get out of it?”

“Good question,” Varian held his chin.

A vial of cold-fire solution would do the trick. I knew I should have brought some! What was I thinking? Varian rubbed his face. He really was tired.

Suddenly, from down the hall, the sound of rolling glass turned all three young men’s heads. The sound grew closer, until it slowed to a stop at their crystallized feet.

It was a vial of cold-fire solution.

“Where—” Varian stuttered. “Who—” he looked down the hall and saw no one. “It’s the solution I need to free us.”

“Great, don’t look a gift-horse in the mouth!” Lance exclaimed.

As quickly as could be done, Varian freed all three of them from the crystals.

On their way back to their dorms, Varian saw down the hall where the other door let out that the same crystals, grown and melted down like someone escaped, were present in front of the door.

When Varian got back to his own dorm, he found it almost eerily peaceful. Hugo was sitting at his desk, seemingly working on some rather difficult homework assignment. He did not even lift his head as Varian walked inside.

“Hey.” The dark haired student said.

Hugo looked at him with bored eyes. Before turning back to his work. “Hey.”

Varian paused. “Work night?”

“None of your business,” Hugo said.

Varian huffed. “Right.”

The night passed by, and the next day came.

With it, the results of the Chemythstry test.

Varian doesn’t say this often enough, but he really should: even when he doesn’t think he got it right, it always helps to do the extra credit.

“One point!” Varian yelled, running into the Castleteria. His friends snapped their heads towards him, just as he reached their table and slammed the paper down on the desk.

“I got the best score by a single point. Extra credit,” Varian said, entirely out of breath and smiling like a mad man. He was speaking very loudly into their ears, but no one had the heart to tell him. The past few days, Varian hadn’t smiled that much. Any improvement in that regard was welcome without conditions.

His friends gave him their congratulations.

“Do we get a chance to guess who got the second best score?” Lance grinned.

“That’s the best part,” Varian tapped at the table like a drum.

A noise of disappointment turned the heads of the table. Standing there was Hugo, of all people. “Boastful is not a good look on you, farm boy.”

To his credit, Varian did not take the bait. He swallowed whatever he was about to say, and simply smiled. “All joking aside, you put up a good fight. Sorry there was only room for one person to be the best this time,” Varian did let himself revel in saying those sweet sweet humble words. He wasn’t above adding some pettiness at the end, though. “Your highness.”

Hugo seemed unaffected.

“Eh, I’ll live. After all,” Hugo looked Varian in the eyes from behind his glasses. “I’m destined to do it for the rest of my life.”

Varian stared at him, unblinking, before looking back to the table. “Guess that gives you all the time you’ll need to get better.”

Hugo’s face scrunched up slightly, but he said nothing, leaving the group absent from his oh-so-pleasant company to get his lunch.

For a few moments, Varian just sat there. Then, he gasped.

“Oh shit, I didn’t get any food,” Varian said, before bolting towards the line, his friends repressing some giggles at their resident alchemist’s antics. Funnily enough, Varian managed to get in line right behind Hugo. At first they said nothing, but clearly that wasn’t going to stay that way. Whatever their conversation entailed, it was out of ear-shot of the table.

As Rapunzel and Nuru mainly became the ones speaking amongst the rest of the gang, Eugene nudged Lance to speak to him directly.

“I’m worried about those two,” Eugene said, quietly, referring to Varian and Hugo.

“What do you mean?” Lance asked.

“They’re like a lit match over an oil spill. One wrong breeze and something’s going to explode,” Eugene frowned. “I know this is how they are, but if it continues, it may lead to somewhere they don’t like.”

Lance nodded, expression neutral, before he began to grin. “Or they’ll fall in love.”

Eugene’s own expression fell somewhere between bewilderment and ultimate confusion.

Back in the lunch line, Varian and Hugo were once again arguing about the specifics of who got what correct and who didn’t, as they flickered between repressed smiles, and steadily more genuine frowns.

At the end of the day, alone in his dorm room (for once), Hugo gave his mother a call. After the initial talk regarding his latest job for her, the topic turned to the one he’d been waiting for.

“How are your academics?”

“The usual,” he tried to sound nonchalant. “Just got back a test. I got one of the best grades in the class. You know me.”

Donella hummed. “I do know you. I’m sure it was nothing you couldn’t handle.”

Hugo beamed, glad that the only witness to his joy was Olivia, sitting at his side wrestling with the end of his sleeve like it was a battle for the ages.

The blond took his chance at lull in the conversation. “So, with Legacy Day coming up,” he started to say. *Ask for a break from the jobs!* He tried to force himself to spit out.

“Hugo,” Donella cut him off.

Her tone gave him pause.

“You usually say ‘the best’, not ‘one of the best.’”

Hugo swallowed some air. “Can’t win them all. No matter how much sleep you lose over trying.”

Donella cleared her throat. “I’m sure you can catch up on all the sleep you need *after* Legacy Day.”

Hugo wilted. “My thoughts exactly.”

Ain’t no rest for the wicked; or, in this case, the soon to be Sorcerer’s Apprentice. Very soon.

“See you in a week.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for waiting! This was surprisingly a hard chapter to write. The next one is a little more of a fun one to write tho :) Drink some water!!!

Secret Tunnels

Chapter Summary

As Hugo struggles to complete job after job for Donella, Varian's curiosity lands them both in an unusual setting.

Chapter Notes

Yes the title is an ATLA reference. Yes I am hilarious. Please hold your applause. Hope you enjoy this chapter!! I'm very proud of how well it came out! :D

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Hugo was busy as a bee.

Legacy Day was closing in, now only a few days away now, and Hugo had been sent on theft after theft as theft. All late-night operations.

Hugo wasn't stupid, he knew why the pace of the jobs were picking up.

Donella's favorite means of getting him to do what she wanted was about to be null and void. Once he signed the Storybook of Legends, his destiny would be set in stone, and she couldn't hang the threat of taking it away over his head.

A part of Hugo enjoyed the jobs for that exact reason. It served as a reminder that the light at the end of the tunnel was near. Still, if he had to hear Cyrus' voice one more consecutive day, he was gonna lose his mind. But he'd get through them. He always did. No pain no gain, after all, etcetera, and all that inspirational crap.

Overall, Hugo couldn't be better!

Okay. So. Hugo was maybe a little sleep deprived. Not that much; not enough to affect his grades yet. He probably wouldn't have noticed the exhaustion had he not found himself struggling to keep his eyes open all through his classes.

Magicology was the worst part. Right before lunch, stuck in the middle of the day, Hugo was stranded without a second wind to get him through it. When he did have the energy to focus, his mind didn't want to keep itself on Madam Baba Yaga's lecture. Instead, it drifted elsewhere.

Varian, and his crooked toothed smile that he showed every time he correctly answered a question in class, was difficult to ignore. Hugo fought not to stare. The shorter student had been so very

prideful these past few days. It was just very, for lack of a better word, Varian.

Actually, there was a better word for it, Hugo insisted to himself: annoying.

And, strangely phony.

Hugo tried not to even bother thinking about how annoying it was that Varian had been riding off the high of his recent test grade (best in the class; better than Hugo by a single point, so really just by luck). And he was annoying. To be clear. But even that wasn't enough to keep himself awake. With every passing minute, Hugo felt himself losing the fight against sleep.

Meanwhile, Varian was having a lovely day, enjoying not thinking about anything that was leaving him shaking with worry like Legacy Day approaching and covering nothing with a smile and a steadfast focus on being proud of himself, when his friend nudged him.

"Hey," Nuru asked Varian. "Is your roommate dying or something?"

Varian followed her eyes towards Hugo, who was looking worse than normal.

Although, somehow, he still didn't look entirely awful. All nice hair and clothes that suited him well, unlike Varian's floppy (he really should get it cut) hair, and farmer-like clothes that he wears only to not seem rebellious (even though he definitely is a rebel).

"No," Varian answered Nuru. "At least, I don't think so. He's just sleep deprived."

Yong scooted closer in his chair. "What's he losing so much sleep over?"

"Who knows," Varian said.

"You might, that's what I'm asking," Yong answered the non-question.

Varian sighed. "No, I don't know," he brushed the question off. He didn't want to waste his time thinking about his blond rival. It was good that Yong had a curious mind, like he did, but Hugo was not a subject Varian was interested in.

Yong's expression turned sullen. "Maybe he's worried about something. When I get worried, I lose sleep."

Nuru patted him on the back.

Varian frowned. "I can't really picture Hugo being worried about anything. Everything comes easy to him."

Yong gave him a questioning look. "How do you know that, if you don't ask him about it?"

Varian paused.

Nuru nodded. "He's got a point. Sometimes people who seem put together are actually not."

Varian's frown deepened.

Nuru put a hand on his shoulder.

Then, the professor shouted another question.

Varian shook himself off his thoughts, raising his hand to answer. This time, he wasn't fast enough.

Hugo got to it first.

"That is correct, Cast," the professor stated.

Varian repressed a glare. Little by little, though, it was replaced by a look of morbid curiosity when he saw how Hugo deflated after he answered. He was devoid of energy. It explained why he'd been so mercifully quiet today. He'd barely spoken to Varian at all! And that was a good thing.

For the rest of Magicology, in between smiles of pride at every question he got right, Varian found himself glancing back at Hugo, unable to stop his scientific head from doing what it did best: asking questions.

Hugo collapsed into his bed the second he'd gotten back from the day's classes. In his day clothes and everything. He must have been sleeping pretty deeply, cause by the time he woke up it was dark out. The lights in his dorm were off. On the opposite side of the room, Varian was already asleep.

Hugo looked to his desk, intent on checking his mirrorphone, only to find it not sitting on the surface. Instead, he found said mirrorphone hanging off his desk, only barely held off the floor by the charging cord. An unforeseen result of his earlier haze of exhaustion, and the lack of coordination that came with it. He reached for the object and the screen lit up.

It was already past midnight.

Olivia, noticing the light, and her friend being awake, scampered closer to him. He gave her a brief smile. To be honest, Hugo would love to stay here and keep catching up on sleep.

But he still had another job for Don. Hopefully, the nap had provided enough sleep to get it done.

Not one to waste time, Hugo silently swung his legs off the bed, and stood with momentarily shaky balance. He offered out his hand for Olivia, who ran up to his shoulder. From there, he tiptoed to his closet. He opened it slowly, knowing too well by this point that the old hinges would shriek if he moved them any faster. He made quicker work of getting on his jacket, and slinging his bag over and across his shoulder. As he re-shut the doors, Olivia jumped into his jacket pocket.

See? Could someone sleep deprived be this careful? He thought, mentally patting himself on the back.

It was right then that Hugo walked into the wall.

This resulted in a rather loud thud.

I jinxed myself.

In his jacket pocket, he felt Olivia shake herself, annoyed by the collision.

Hugo, as quiet as he could, rushed out into the hallway. Immediately after closing the door, he lifted the robotic mouse from the fabric. He checked her frantically.

“No scrapes,” he muttered. “No breaks,” he sighed.

Olivia squealed happily.

Hugo smiled. “No big mistakes.” He guided her back into the pocket before heading towards tonight’s destination. He was halfway there when it struck him that the sound of his walk-into-the-wall could very well have awoken his roommate. The blond racked his brain to remember if he’d even stirred in his sleep. Hell, if even the raccoon awoke.

Hugo came up empty.

Luckily, the adrenaline helped to kick start his brain. He certainly wasn’t feeling tired anymore. Hopefully, this feeling would last the rest of the night and get him safely through this job.

Varian awoke to the sound of a thud.

Well, awoke wasn’t the right word. He wasn’t really that far into sleep to begin with. He’d gone over to Rapunzel’s dorm earlier in the evening for some rest and relaxation, which usually meant painting pictures, painting nails (Varian’s turquoise and Rapunzel’s purple), and comparing healthy outlets for unchecked and potentially concerning levels of anger. Technical best friend behavior.

By the time he was in the dorm and attempting sleep, it was late. If he had to guess, he’d only been asleep for a half an hour when the thud brought him out of it.

This was soon followed by his dorm open and closing. Then, silence.

Afterwards, Varian turned and saw that Hugo, who had been passed out on his side of the room all afternoon, was gone.

Varian checked his mirrorphone on his desk.

It was past midnight.

Where is he going this late?

Then, Varian remembered his own nighttime activity, a few days prior. He remembered an unknown person eavesdropping on his and his friends’ (technical) test-score-snooping. He remembered a vial rolled to him by an unknown person.

Well, no better time than the present. Might as well take Yong and Nuru’s advice now.

Varian was on his feet, throwing on one of his longer jackets over his pajamas, and his bag of chemicals and supplies (just in case) and heading out the door. He had a roommate to find and grill with questions.

Mercifully, the job was simple.

There weren't even any real security measures. No magical traps, no professors roaming the halls (at least, none that Hugo could see); the door wasn't even double-locked! He picked it in just under six seconds. The initial doors to the library as a whole were definitely double-locked though, electrically and all. It was one of those kinds without a keyhole. So, resourceful as ever, Hugo had to rewire one of the panels that opened the doors automatically. Took a few minutes, but by the end no alarms went off and no tampering was evident, other than an open door (which he planned to close as soon as he left).

Hugo probably could've used some magic on it to get the same result, but it was more fun this way anyhow.

Once inside, he'd found the mirrors, the objects Cyrus had told him Don wanted this time. The room they were kept in, far in the back of the library, was full of them. They ranged in sizes and styles, some large, some small, but all jammed into this one room. He wouldn't be surprised if the total amounted to the thousands.

In the end, this made Hugo's job easier. No need for any replacement or coverup with a stock like that to cover up the missing numbers. In any case, he was too tired to do that anyhow.

Hugo grabbed the ones he could fit into his bag and was on his way in seconds. Cyrus had told him that a few would be alright, that the only real priority was to have them in the first place. Still, the question had arisen in the blond's mind: why? What was so important about these? He hadn't voiced this question. It wouldn't affect him, and knowing might only make things worse. Cyrus didn't give him any warnings, like with the marble a while back, so Hugo didn't ask.

With all that squared away, Hugo had regained a skip in his step, his bag full (and padded to eliminate any clattering noise or potential damage), his head a little clearer, and ready to head back to his room (and back to sleep).

How did he not hear the footsteps approaching?

Just as Hugo was about to step out of the library, a familiar face appeared.

"Hugo?" Varian appeared in the doorway.

Hugo scrambled backwards, back into the library, resisting the urge to double check that the flap of his bag was closed.

"Goggles! Hey, goggles, hey. What are you doing here?" As subtle as he could, Hugo shifted the bag around his shoulder to be hidden behind his back.

"I was," Varian groaned, begrudging his words from his own mouth. "Looking for you."

Hugo blinked. "Why?"

Varian huffed. "I don't know. You just seemed, pretty off your game."

"I am always on my game."

"You look like you're going to pass out."

"You're the one in your pajamas right now."

Varian gave him an indignant look, shifting the jacket he'd throw over said pajamas. "You passed out in your day clothes!"

Hugo sputtered, but could not think up a counterpoint.

This dullness, as opposed to his usual sharp wit, deeply surprised Varian. This didn't seem like the truth-thing he'd been going through about a week or so back. No, this was different. More perplexing, oddly.

"You're acting weird," Varian stated, giving him the once over.

"You're the one in the library after hours," Hugo said.

"So are you!" Varian shot back.

Hugo rolled his eyes, but no response was forthcoming.

Come to think of it, why is Hugo in the library of all places? Varian thought. Is this where he's been coming these past few days?

Then it hit him.

At that same moment, Hugo was just about ready to make a break for it, regardless of how suspicious that would seem, when his roommate's expression shifted dramatically.

Instead of a frown, he was smiling.

No, not smiling: grinning.

Hugo's insides twisted.

"Oh, I know what's going on," Varian said.

"You do?" *Don is going to kill me.*

"Oh yeah," Varian said slowly. His grin grew wider.

Hugo tries to look calm. *Don is really going to kill me.*

Varian stepped forward, slightly into the barrier of Hugo's personal space. Hugo's mind was static, too frozen in his thoughts to think to back up.

"You're trying to get more study time, cause you know I'm doing better than you."

"I—" Hugo stopped. "What?!" His panic swapped with outrage. "I am not!"

Varian just stood there giggling madly.

Hugo went red in the face. "You are the most insufferable—" unable to finish the sentence, he stormed off, back into the library and away from his roommate of undetermined insufferability.

Varian trailed close behind.

“No, no, I’m flattered,” Varian was doing a terrible job at containing his laughter. “It’s really noble of you to try so hard.”

“What have I told you about being prideful, Goggles? It’s a shitty look on you.”

“Right, cause it looks so flattering on *you*. ”

Hugo didn’t bother responding to that one.

“Where are you going?” Varian half-laughed, half-questioned, watching Hugo walk further into the library. “Exit that way,” Varian pointed in the opposite direction.

“Maybe I don’t wanna go back to our dorm right now. That’s where most of my headaches happen.”

Varian scoffed. “I think you’ll live.”

Hugo ignored him. Varian followed. “Seriously, you good?”

“None of your business,” Hugo stated. His eyes scanned around, searching for an escape from this conversation (if it can even be called that), when he finally noticed a door almost hidden by the book shelves. He sped forward, but once in front of it found that the handle would not budge.

Varian frowned. “Hey, you don’t have to do that, I’ll just head back to the dorm. I can see where I’m not wanted.”

Hugo turned around. “Good to hear. Regardless, I think I’ll be spending the night here.” Without looking, Hugo knocked on the door lightly with one hand. It wasn’t his best lie, but it would have to do. “Where I won’t have to deal with any more of your bull—”

That’s when he noticed the blue smoke. Varian seemed to notice at the same time he did. Neither had a chance to question what it was, when they both saw a bright flash coming from the door.

Immediately afterwards, they were dropped somewhere.

Literally, dropped.

The floor was hard. Additionally, it was dusty.

All in all, a terrible place to land after a fall.

Hugo groaned, shifting his arm and pushing himself up slightly. One of his arms fell beside his bag. Terror filled him. Scrambling, he practically tore open the top flap, examining the mirrors one after the other.

Finding no damage, Hugo released a heavy breath.

Beside him, Varian was still on the ground.

Hugo reclosed the bag.

“You alive?” the blond asked, as he adjusted and checked his glasses for cracks. Like the mirrors, he found none.

Varian muttered something, then pulled himself off the floor. “Well, you’re here, so for all we know I could be dead and this is hell.”

“Oh ha ha,” Hugo annunciated each ‘ha’. Then, as he stood, he actually looked around. Confusion swirled in him. “Are we still in the library?”

The two roommates had been magically dropped into a hallway. At face value, it was not that different from the rest of the library. The walls were made of bookshelves, so that was a good sign. However, the clearer the surroundings became, the stranger they seemed.

The shelves themselves were visibly older and less well maintained. They reached down to the floor but not the ceiling. The floor itself was marred with dirt and dust and webs. It was more comparable to a dirt road than anything else. On the ceiling (not as high as in the main library; more like the height of the average dorm room) was a myriad of glowing mushrooms, creating a similar effect as Nuru’s star stickers. The whole space felt confined, and not just because of the narrowness, which the usual library aisles lacked. This was not an aisle, it was a hallway; going two directions, with no doors or ends in sight.

There was no door near them. Wherever they ended up, via magic it seemed, no exit was in sight.

“I’ve never seen this section.”

“Neither have I,” Varian said, hand in his hair removing a piece of cobweb from it.

Hugo laughed. “Wow. Varian doesn’t know something. What a shocker.”

Varian rolled his eyes, finally getting on his feet with no help from Hugo. “Okay, I get it, I haven’t exactly been tactful in my victory. But don’t try to act like if you were in my shoes you wouldn’t be acting even worse.”

Hugo put his hands in his jacket pockets. “No, I wouldn’t, because I’m not desperate for attention.”

The freckled student stuttered. “I am not *desperate*. ”

Hugo hummed, faux-understandingly. “Keep telling yourself that.”

Varian stood there stewing for a moment, contemplating some very unfriendly words to say, when he saw something move in the distance of the long hallway. Hugo seemed to take note of his expression and turned to see what he was seeing.

Far enough away that the details were not clear, there stood a person (presumably), unmoving but undeniably staring in the direction of the roommates.

Oh good. Varian thought, sighing slightly. *Maybe they know a way out of here.*

“Hey!” Varian started to call out.

Suddenly, Hugo’s hand wrapped around his and started dragging him along at running speed, in the opposite direction of the distant figure.

Varian stuttered. "What are you doing?!"

Once he was sure whoever that was didn't follow them, Hugo stopped running. He glanced back at Varian, who was thoroughly confused and irritated.

Hugo coughed. "I got scared. Creepy tunnels, strange figure in the distance, you do the math."

Hugo was not scared. He didn't *really* think there was some kind of monster down here. Most likely, that was a staff member, who must've known about the door and heard them fall through it into whatever this place was. Hugo knew that was the most probable explanation, and that's why he ran. If he got caught wandering around at night, even if they didn't see him steal, or see him with the mirrors, it would place him near the crime a little too close to the time it happened. To do so would be sloppy, a rookie mistake. Don would be so disappointed, to put it lightly.

Good thing Hugo wasn't a rookie.

Of course, he couldn't tell his roommate any of his logic here.

"Oh, boo hoo," Varian said. "Is that why you needed to hold my hand?"

Hugo dropped his hand. "We'll get in trouble for being out of the dorms so late. Best thing we can do is find our own way out of here."

"Uh huh," Varian crossed his arms. "And I'm assuming you have some idea of where to go."

"Not a clue," Hugo sarcastically. "We could go towards the stranger that way, or go the other way. Wow. So many options."

Varian, ignoring him halfway through the statement, grinned. He took out a few vials from his bag. He combined them each into one vial, transforming the liquid from watery and unformed to bundle of shining string. "This will help us know where we've been."

Hugo examined the results with indifference.

Faintly, an unsettling noise echoed through the hall, disturbing both students.

"The hand holding offer is still on the table, if you need it," Varian remarked, his tone a little shaky.

Hugo pretended not to consider the question. "Let's just get moving."

And move they did. There seemed no end to these mysterious halls. The books that lined them were equally as strange.

At one point, when Varian attempted to take one from amongst the others, it remained in his hands for only a second, before snapping itself back into place on the shelf. Hugo certainly found his roommate's shock amusing, and he made that very clear with his snort of laughter. At another point, Hugo thought he saw someone in the distance. The jump and yelp he may or may not have let out will not be discussed here. Nor will the very amused look Varian had after the fact.

While the thread kept them from losing their way, it did nothing to find them a way out. Through it all, their wordlessness was steadfast.

Until it wasn't.

"Where did you learn a trick like that anyhow? I haven't seen it before."

Varian looked at him, perplexed. Then, realizing he was referring to the thread he had conjured up, Varian gave him a lopsided smile. "I made it up myself."

Hugo's eyes widened, but he was given no opening to say something, as his roommate continued talking.

"Back home, we have a lot of crop fields, the biggest of which are corn. As a kid, my family was worried I would get lost running around in there, so they had me start using thread to find my way back. But, the thread would get stuck in places and get caught here and there, and it was a limited amount, so it was a real nuisance. I decided to solve the problem with science! Eventually leading to this," Varian gestured to the thread. "Not only is it able to keep itself from getting caught on things, and its length is infinitely longer than any normal thread, coming from the liquid's source like this glass vial, but it can also be called back to me with a careful few drops of this other solution," Varian pulled a small blue vial from his bag. "In conclusion, this scientific magical alchemical thread is of my own design," Varian inhaled a breath, then exhaled, still beaming.

Hugo stared at him. "And you carry around the ingredients for this because..."

"You never know what you'll need when you go out. Preparedness is a virtue."

Hugo hummed. "Not bad thinking. I follow a different rule: Don't be caught unawares."

"That's almost exactly the meaning of what I said," Varian deadpanned.

"Tomato tomAto."

Varian held the thread a little tighter as he unfurled it. "Well, not everyone can be taught from birth to use magic."

"No, some of us can't," Hugo didn't stop his words like he usually would. "And for the record, I wasn't taught 'since birth', you know?" He was right, both because he only started really learning once he was old enough, and because he was only adopted by Don later in his childhood, but he knew Varian would only know and assume the former reason, not the latter.

"You know what I mean," Varian muttered.

Hugo stopped himself. This guy didn't need to know his sob story; orphanhood, poverty, being adopted by Don, stealing for her, and only *then* getting to learn magic. "Well, I'd say learning on your own, inventing new solutions to problems, that's impressive in its own way."

"Oh?" Varian tried not to take his words seriously.

"Things just seem to come easy for you, don't they?" Hugo asked, almost absentmindedly, like he hoped Varian didn't hear him.

Varian found himself utterly struck by his words. *Does he actually think that of me? That it comes easy? Like I think it does for him?*

Varian hooted out a laugh. "Only with alchemy."

The shorter student expression went very soft. Hugo noticed.

Hugo let his words spill out. “On that we differ. I was always more naturally gifted with mechanics. Magic and the like took time.”

Varian raised an eyebrow. “Mechanics?”

On cue, Olivia peaked out from Hugo’s jacket pocket. “An example of my work. Although, she has a bit of magic in her too. But that was a later addition.”

“Your only great creation,” Varian cooed at Olivia.

Hugo pouted, despite himself. “I wouldn’t say *only*. ” His mind shifted back to Varian’s own invention. “Seriously, how have you not shown that off in class before? The professors would lose their marbles for something like this.”

Varian flashed incredulous expression. As if the answer was obvious.

Hugo would be the judge of that.

“No magic usage outside of class, remember?”

Hugo winced. “Right.”

“I’d probably get detention if they found I made this at home.” *I really can’t afford to get another detention.* Varian thought. *The next will be my third, so Dad will get called.* The dark-haired student did his best to appear unbothered. “In any case, I don’t need their approval. I know the facts. I’m a great alchemist,” he tried to sound convinced. If he couldn’t convince himself, he wouldn’t convince anyone else. “Better than you, at least.”

Some part of Hugo could feel the falsity of the statement, beyond his pride. He chose to ignore this.

“Quite a high bar to reach,” Hugo smirked, half-bitterly.

Varian smirked back at him, absorbing the same level of bitterness in his expression. “I enjoy a challenge.”

Hugo tried to imagine the idea of being untethered to approval. He tried to maintain the same attitude in his own life, but for him the approval was more vital than Varian would ever have to deal with. Approval from Don was the lifeline to his future. Without it, he wasn’t a sorcerer’s apprentice, or a sorcerer, or anything at all.

Not until Legacy Day.

Only a few days to go.

They walked in silence for a while after that, then Varian re-broke the thin ice. “So, what sort of little alchemical, magical, and otherwise scientific objects have you invented in recent years? Besides Olivia, I mean.”

A smile broke out on Hugo’s face.

“Giving yourself away there, Goggles. Sounds like you think highly of my skill.”

Varian huffed. “No, I’m just looking forward to when you say you’ve done nothing.”

Hugo thought for a moment. “Well, I suppose that isn’t entirely inaccurate. Haven’t been up to much inventing these days. Not since I was a kid. Don’t have the time.”

Varian paused. His face lacked any obvious satisfaction. “That’s a bummer.”

“It’s not easy being destined for greatness,” Hugo said, factually. “Eh, there’ll be time later.”

Varian was quiet at that statement. “Yeah, for you.”

A glacial level of ice encased the conversation.

Right. Hugo remembered. *Varian’s a rebel.*

Hugo stared at him. Something twisted in his stomach. He wanted it to go away. “You are so weird, you know that? I get that you like alchemy and all, but you’ll live without it. You have a good destiny. It’s not like it’s gonna wreck your life or anything.”

“You know,” Varian’s tone dropped into something like hurt. “I didn’t ask to be the next Dorothy,” he said. “It’s not some super fun thing all the time. I’m going to spend most of my life in the middle of nowhere, stuck at home.”

“Okay so,” Hugo tried to walk through his thought process. “What? You thought because you hate the idea of spending time with your family that it’s a good idea to throw it away for a hobby?”

“I don’t hate my family!” Varian immediately protested. “You’re the next Sorcerer’s Apprentice. You should understand how much this life can matter to people like us. I just—”

“Just wanna toe the line?” Hugo bit out. “That’s not how life works.”

“Oh, like you would know that?”

Hugo stopped dead in his tracks. “Yes, I do know that. So don’t try to rope me into whatever projections you have assigned to me. *You* not seeing how good you have it, doesn’t mean *I’m* just as delusional. I’m not you. Maybe you have your reservations about destiny, but I don’t. You may not have asked for your destiny, but I did!”

“What does any of this have to do with you—” Varian’s yell cut itself short. “Wait, you asked for your destiny?”

Hugo went sheet white. “Forget it. I misspoke,” he said, before turning tail and continued walking down the tunnel. He took the next turn, finding it led to two paths. Without thinking, he picked one and walked.

“Where are you going?” Varian called out.

“Away from you!”

Hugo heard Varian stutter furiously.

“Fine. I’ll take the other tunnel. I’ll be sure to let our professors know why you aren’t in class tomorrow. Cause you’ll be lost down here all night and day!”

“Fine,” Hugo didn’t bother looking back. Although, the image of Varian, still in pajamas and a jacket, with that angry expression of his, tempted just a bit. Not enough though.

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

“Fine!”

“Stop trying to have the last word!” Varian yelled, now a distance sound, before marching into the other tunnel.

“Fine!” Hugo yelled back.

Silence followed.

Hugo knew he definitely wasn’t heard.

Surprise surprise, the hallways continued to be long and boring and insanely dusty, even without a horrible roommate by Hugo’s side. In fact, somehow, it might have gotten worse. His surroundings were becoming aggravating in their disorganization and simultaneous monotony. On top of that, the sound of his own footsteps was not exactly music to his ears.

The school was big, sure, but he didn’t think it had this much space underground. Then again, maybe this wasn’t a basement. For all Hugo knew, that door could have sent him to the other side of the world, to some kind of bookish catacombs. The idea wasn’t too awful, until he considered that the books weren’t letting themselves be read.

Plus, Hugo was still quite tired.

All of this combined left Hugo with very little to think about.

Hugo’s mind wandered back to the events of a few days prior: the test, the results, and most surprisingly, Varian’s failed break-in to the Chemistry classroom.

When Hugo went to watch, he hadn’t been seen or heard by Varian, that was obvious. Not even when he rolled the cold-fire solution to him so that he could escape.

Hugo had very good reasons for helping his roommate out. If Varian got caught in an amateur theft job, even if he didn’t steal anything, the school may assume he’d been the one stealing all the items *Hugo* had been taking. That would be great for Hugo, but it may lead to the faculty searching their joint room, and keeping a closer eye on the blond himself. And that wouldn’t be good.

Hugo did not pity Varian at that moment, nor this one.

Far from it, he felt angry.

Varian had a good destiny. A great one, even. One with a Happily Ever After. He didn't even have to be royalty to get it. But that isn't what stung Hugo so greatly; Hugo had a good destiny too, but he had to *work* for it. Constantly proving himself. Constant multitasking. Good grades, flawless thefts, no problems, no nuisance for Don. The constant threat of it all being taken away from him. Varian didn't have to do all that. All he had to do was wait for his turn in line.

And he didn't even want it.

A lifetime of security, family, and simple ease, and Varian *didn't even want it*.

And sure, Varian was a good alchemist. Maybe even a great one.

Okay maybe he was sort of a genius.

Hugo grinned, despite his frustration, thinking back on the thread Varian had invented (INVENTED) all on his own.

He was really something.

Something confusing.

Hugo loved alchemy too. And science. And magic. But if he had to choose between those things and a future where he didn't go hungry; a future where he was safe, with a family, he knew what he would pick.

So why couldn't Varian do the same?

His thoughts were stopped short by an unfamiliar noise.

Now, Hugo was not one to get scared easily. Not with the strange things he had seen over the years. However, he also wasn't stupid. Just in case he needed to defend himself from any tunnel monsters (or whatever that hunched figure was in the distance earlier), Hugo slowly pulled one of the mirrors from his bag. It wouldn't do much damage, but it was better than nothing. If he was lucky, it would have a magical self defense system to it.

The noise continued. Distant and undefined. Location indeterminable.

Hugo heard more than felt his feet move faster. With each step faster than the previous, his heart rate rose, and rose, until he was practically sprinting.

What was down here? Why was he all alone? What was he thinking?

Hugo, unaware of his surroundings, walked straight into something, causing him to fall flat on his ass.

The first thing he noticed, when he focused on what he ran into, was a glowing thread.

"Oh," Hugo stood suddenly. "Hey."

"Hey." Varian looked him up and down, expression like he was bored. He readjusted the thread in his hand.

Even after Hugo managed to walk into it, the object stayed untangled.

“What’s that?” Varian asked.

Following his eyes, Hugo glanced down at the mirror still in his hand.

Hugo willed himself to stay calm. “I found it in one of the tunnels.”

Varian nodded, falling back into thought. “Might be a sign that someone’s been down here before. They must have gotten out.”

Hugo said nothing, trying to end the conversation in the mirror before it went on too long. Fortunately, this worked.

Unfortunately, it worked a little too well.

“*Have you* found a way out yet?” Varian asked, the ghost of a smirk on his face.

“Nope,” Hugo tried to sound nonchalant. He grinned. “Have you?”

The phantom smirk disappeared. “No. Not yet.”

“That’s what I thought,” Hugo tapped his foot. He kept the mirror in his hand, not willing to risk stuffing it back into his bag and letting his nosy roommate see the rest of his haul.

“It doesn’t bode well that we ended up in the same place,” Hugo mentioned. “This place is like a labyrinth.”

“Hopefully minus any monsters. You run into that figure?”

Hugo shook his head.

Varian held his own chin in his hand. “We should be heading in the same direction. Otherwise one of us may end up stuck down here.”

Hugo shivered. “Yeah, good idea,” he said without thinking.

“Good idea, huh?” Varian asked. .

Hugo started walking down the hall. “I didn’t say anything.”

“I think you did,” Varian said, insistent.

“Get your ears checked, Goggles,” he tried to ignore him.

“After you, Glasses,” Varian said.

Then, they looked at each other; green eyes on blue eyes, both reflecting the ceiling lights of blue and green, making their eyes look almost the same color.

Sudden and unwelcome, their earlier words flooded back to them.

Said explosion of emotions felt unfinished, hiding behind their eyes waiting for a chance to reappear and finish the kill. They both noticed it.

So, they stopped talking.

They walked for a while longer. Hard to say how long. Time was difficult to tell in this place. There were no windows, no natural light. It was silent, in any case. Eventually, a bright yellow light, different from the blue and green of the rest of the hallways, grew closer as they walked.

Both roommates silently debated whether this was a good thing or not. Once they reached the source, their curiosity increased.

At the end of the hall was a room. It was more comparable to a studio apartment than a library room. Not a neat apartment, mind you. Books were stacked half haphazardly throughout the small, each threatening to topple at any slight shake or movement. Other objects included a globe, a telescope (but down here it would be of no use), a couch with a few worn pillows and blankets covering the fabric, and many lit candle sticks.

Varian and Hugo stared at the candles especially intently.

“You thinking what I’m thinking?”

The figure from before.

“That whatever’s down here is living here?” Varian said. “Then, yeah.”

In addition to all these items, there was also a giant mirror. Unlike the rest of the space, mostly covered in dust, damage, and clutter, the mirror was in mint condition. There was not a speck of dust visible on its surface.

Hugo examined the mirror closer. It didn’t appear that special. Big, sure, but the surface was as normal as could be.

His eyes floated to Varian’s face, as he was also considering the space and this mysteriously clean reflective surface. His face was slightly scrunched up, like when he gets angry. Hugo could only assume it was a scientific anger. Hugo was familiar with the feeling.

His hair, lacking the goggles which usually held it back, nearly threatened to cover his eyes. Said eyes were hopping this way and that at the mirror and the room reflected in it.

“That mirror you found in the hallway could be connected to this one,” Varian said airily, not registering Hugo’s staring. “Maybe it’s a way out.”

Hugo shook himself, and spoke quickly. “Yeah, yeah. Maybe.” *Obviously not.*

“If I can just...” Varian raised a hand, about to tap the glass.

“Graceless gears!”

The roommates whipped around. An old man stood a few yards away from them, having just exited a different hallway from the one they had entered through.

He held his chest, catching his breath, clearly frightened.

The same could be said for the roommates.

The old man looked around, embarrassed. Without responding, he began cleaning up the surrounding space. Reorganizing books and papers, frantically wiping dust off tables, frantic with

the urgency of a man who seemed to have little to no visitors.

“Who are you?” Varian asked.

The old man stopped what he was doing. He paused before responding. “Salamander spoons spitting, mad relish for forgo the deers.”

A beat of silence followed.

Hugo leaned towards Varian. “Am I having a stroke?”

The old man wilted in clear disappointment.

Varian paused, then gasped quietly. “I think he’s speaking Riddlish. Do you speak it?”

“Take a guess.”

Varian tapped his chin. “Me neither.”

“Any other ideas on getting out of here?” Hugo asked his roommate.

Before Varian could respond, the old man waved his arms shyly, getting the roommates’ attention. He seemed to understand the conundrum. He stood there tapping his foot for a moment, thinking. Then, he snapped his hand, hurried to a nearby stack of papers. Digging through them, he gave no indication of what he was looking for until he proudly presented the roommates with a crudely done, but still functional, map. On the top of the paper, in very very old calligraphy, it read: “**The Vault of Lost Tales.**”

Underneath, in smaller writing but the same style, it also read: “**Map by Milton and Giles Grimm.**”

The old man pointed to the name ‘Giles’, then back to himself.

“Oh,” Varian said, in sudden recognition. “You’re Giles *Grimm* ? The missing guy?”

“And the Headmaster’s brother?” Hugo added, suddenly very nervous. “You’re not gonna tell Grimm, sorry, the other Grimm, about us being here, right?”

Giles shook his head, laughing a little, like was in on some joke that they weren’t.

“Well, thank you for this,” Varian said, taking the map from his hands. “We should get out of here.”

“Uh,” Hugo nodded to the thread in Varian’s hands. “Goggles?”

The meaning didn’t stick to Varian until he himself looked down at the thread.

“Shit!” the shorter student rushed to the archway the thread was coming from.

As Varian re-furled the thread using the blue vial (the process was gonna take a minute, Varian insisted), Hugo stood back. Suddenly, the old man coughed, getting the blond’s attention. He pointed to the mirror in Hugo’s hand, giving him a questioning, somewhat scolding look.

“Together or not, taught to bought, bought to rot, yours or not?” he asked.

Hugo blinked. Although he had no way of understanding him, he had a feeling this guy knew where this mirror was supposed to be. Not in these weird hidden hallways, but back in the main library. After connecting the dots, Hugo sighed.

“Sorry, old man, but I need this more than you know.”

The old man shook his head. His look he gave was a strange one to Hugo. Not exactly angry. Just disappointed. Usually those two things were inseparable.

“There we go,” Varian spoke aloud. All the thread had been gathered up. “Let’s get moving.”

Hugo nodded. *Not a moment too soon.*

With that, they headed down the new direction they’d been pointed in.

“Bye!” Varian yelled to the old man, who waved back enthusiastically.

Before long, they reached a door.

“If this takes us to another secret underground library tunnel thing, I’m blaming you,” Hugo grumbled.

“Why not blame Headmaster Grimm?” Varian posited. “Shouldn’t he be warning students about the magic labyrinth in the library?”

Hugo opened his mouth to respond, but the words died in his throat. “Oh shit. You’re a genius, Goggles.”

Varian grinned like a Cheshire cat. “Thank you for noticing.”

Hugo rolled his eyes. *Okay, list of blame. 1. Grimm. 2. Goggles.*

There was something written on the door. The sight ripped him from his thoughts.

Hugo adjusted his glasses.

No, not written; carved.

Ulla & Donella

were here

“Mom.” Two voices said simultaneously.

Hugo looked at Varian.

Varian was wide eyed, gripping his hair in an almost painful manner. The lack of goggles on his head, in that moment, was jarring; distressing. “That’s her writing,” Varian breathed out a laugh of pure elation. After a minute, he calmed him enough to form more words. “Wait, you said mom too. Is this Donella person your mom? Has she ever mentioned finding this place? Or mentioned my mom Ulla?”

Hugo cracked a smile. “Yes, that’s my mom, and no to both other questions. Mom doesn’t tell me shit, let alone about her years at this dump of a school. What about your mom?”

Varian stopped breathing.

Hugo did not ask why. “I’ll take that as a no,” he joked.

Varian didn’t laugh.

Hugo focused on the door.

The handle would not budge. Hugo remembered the door into the labyrinth, resisting the urge to facepalm. Of course the same logic would apply.

Before his hand hit the door, Hugo glanced down at the mirror still in his hand. Wordlessly, he handed it off to Varian, just in case the magic in it caused problems with the magic in the door. If it did, let it blow up in someone else’s face.

Hugo knocked on the door. Varian braced himself. Blue smoke appeared around the two of them, then a flash of light.

Suddenly, the roommates were dropped onto the library floor.

“Who designed this school?” Varian groaned. “And, if I may add a follow up question, what is wrong with them?!”

“A question for the ages,” Hugo grumbled. “I’m still inclined to blame you for tonight more than the building architecture, Freckles.” *Less than I blame the Headmaster.* Hugo thought. *But still.*

“Hey,” Varian stood, dusting himself off. “Aren’t I the reason we got out in the first place.”

“No, that was the crazy old guy in the cellar-room who helped us get out. You and your thread just got lucky,” Hugo said.

Varian glared at him. “Not like you had better luck.”

“Ah yes, I’m bad at directions, you’re bad at everything but directions.” Hugo said, purposefully petty. “Equally bad scenarios.”

Varian resisted the urge to bite back. Bite back. Bite back at the embodiment of everything he wished he was permitted to have.

But what good would that do either of them?

All that mattered now was getting to Legacy Day. Then, Varian could not-sign, and have the freedom to get what he coveted. A real future. One with his dreams, his family, and his authentic self.

“Listen,” Varian started, slowly. “You don’t wanna deal with me, I don’t wanna deal with you. We each have enough going on right now, so let’s just stay out of each other’s way,” Varian demanded.

“Fine by me,” Hugo agreed, appearing blithe. It was for the best.

His satisfaction was short-lived. Immediately after speaking, he tripped over his dragging feet. Varian grabbed him, preventing collision with the ground.

How has this happened twice?! Hugo attempted to escape out of his roommate’s arms, utterly mortified.

Varian helped him to his feet, arms hovering around him in case he collapsed again. “You really are tired,” he said.

“I’ve been worse,” Hugo shrugged. He hoped the rings around his eyes were covered by his glasses.

Varian stared at him, analytical and thoughtful, if not pitiful. Hugo had little time and no brain power left to decide which was the true emotion he recognized in that expression, before his roommate spoke.

“Just this once,” Varian muttered.

Hugo turned to him. “What was that?”

Varian sighed. “Just this once, what if I brought you the day’s assignments. You could spend tomorrow catching up on sleep, work on them later.”

Hugo’s mind went blank. Luckily, he had a good automatic response. “I wasn’t gonna worry about fixing my sleep schedule till after Legacy Day.” It was the truth. Painfully so.

“I’m sure your mom would prefer it if you didn’t completely faceplant on stage that day, like you almost did not even a minute ago,” Varian said. “Get some rest.”

Hugo considered the idea as he walked to the library doors with his roommate. It sounded nice. Really nice. But, “One day of rest won’t fix it entirely.”

“No,” Varian admitted. “But you’ll be mostly back to normal.”

Hugo looked at him. “I thought you wanted to avoid normal-me.”

“Yeah well,” Varian made a vague motion with his arms. “I don’t pity normal-you.”

Hugo nodded, mockingly taking him seriously, a smug expression. Varian didn’t seem to break, or even play along. Staring at him, he looked genuine. Hugo’s expression fell, ever so slightly. A genuine grin tugged at the corner of his mouth.

Too bad it didn’t last.

“Just what are you two doing in here?” the professor spoke.

Both roommates jumped at the new voice. They turned back to the doorway that they were just moments from stepping out to find Mrs. Her Majesty the White Queen standing there, straight

spine, chin up, entirely unamused.

In contrast, Varian and Hugo stood as still as possible, almost as though they believed if they didn't move they wouldn't be seen.

They were standing a few feet away from the professor, by the way. They were seen.

"The library is closed after hours."

"The door was unlocked," Hugo said immediately, a rudeness to his tone.

Varian motioned for him to shut up. Having no classes with this particular professor, Varian's only real knowledge of her came from Rapunzel, who attended her Princessology course. The most intense tidbit was how she insisted that her students refer to her by the full title every time they raised their hand.

She was from Wonderland queen (and despite having little to no authority in Ever After) she had brought these expectations with her when she and her subjects had fled that land and come here, and when she took up teaching at their school for the time being. She even still dressed like a queen, all white dresses that dragged on the ground, tall crowns, and a face full of overkill concealer. All in all, Varian knew little of her beyond that. He did know this though: you don't backtalk former royalty.

"I'll expect you both to report to detention tomorrow," the professor's tone was raucous.

"No." All the color drained from Varian's face. "I've already gotten two detentions."

Her Majesty stared them both down. "Then I suppose you'll have to explain yourself to your parents."

Hugo realized the same thing. In turn, his own panic arose. "So have I! Can't we just get a warning?"

The professor said nothing. She glanced down at the small mirror in Varian's hand.

Varian forgot he was holding it. "We found it in the library, in the—" *Well, Hugo did. Apparently,* he thought to himself.

Her Majesty plucked the object from his hand.

With that, the professor turned heel. "Get back to your dorms. If I find you out here again, I will not be so generous to only give you both one detention."

And so they walked in silence. Eerie. Heavy. Full of dread, for many reasons. For similar reasons. For different reasons. For reasons each their own.

"Offer rescinded," Varian said simply, voice suddenly hoarse and raw. "Don't expect me to cover for you if you sleep the day away."

Hugo swallowed his breath. He put on a face he'd seen all his life; cold and unphased. He said nothing.

Just to spite him, Hugo took the next day off anyway.

Detention came and went in silence for Hugo.

Hugo had taken the day off, only getting out of bed to attend detention after classes let out for the day. He hadn't taken the day off from school in a while. Not even when he broke his foot. It was strange.

Varian made good on his words, and no papers were delivered.

They hadn't spoken all day. Especially not in detention.

Afterwards, Hugo went from class to class collecting his missed work, before he went back to the dorm, intent on getting said work done as soon as possible. The moment he closed the door, he got a call from his mother.

Hugo tried not to nurse his contempt for Varian at this moment, and it truly was contempt (he was also trying to convince himself of that) into anything less palpable. Blaming him was easy in the face of his terror.

When he answered mirrorphone, Hugo didn't even have the chance to speak before her voice froze him in place.

"I just got a very interesting call from Headmaster Grimm."

Hugo had been yelled at before. He learned to tune it out, to go numb, wait it out. He was very good at waiting. It made him a good sorcerer in training, a good thief, a good son. This time was no different.

From what he allowed himself to hear, Grimm said nothing about any possible thefts. Only that Hugo was caught in the library after closing, earning him a detention. But Don knew why he was in that library. Thankfully, it seemed this could be called a close call. But, Don did not accept close calls.

"What do you have to say for yourself?!" Donella finally concluded, pausing to see if he had the nerve to respond.

Hugo heard himself speak. "They probably don't even know anything's gone yet. Plus, there were a million of those things. Too many to count. I highly doubt they'll see that anything's missing."

"And if they do?" Her volume was down, but her tone was somehow even scarier than before. Don's tone was pure cold rage. "Hugo, if this gets connected back to you, I'm not going to cover for you. I can't, you know that."

Her son had the good sense to stop talking. Don's tone was pure cold rage. Hugo's mind jumped to all the possible worst case scenarios. Highest amongst them, his removal from the Legacy Day roster. Grimm knew about him being adopted. If Grimm knew he was still stealing, then that could become a reality. but there was no evidence! There was no—

The hand mirror.

The one Hugo pulled out of his bag and gave to Varian.

The one the stupid queen/professor saw them with.

The one she took from them.

The one she took from *Varian*.

The one Hugo had been too tired to even think about the implications of her finding from them at the time, or even remember the moment until now.

If she simply put it back, believed the lie he'd told Varian, that Varian had told her by extension, and said nothing about the tiny detail to Grimm, then all would be well.

If not...

Hugo couldn't feel his legs.

"If there is anything else I should know about," Don's patience, tenuous already, was gone. "Now is the time to tell me."

In a daze, Hugo began to speak. He told Don about the tunnels, the old man, and finally the door.

He did not tell her about the hand mirror.

Nor about skipping and sleeping through classes. He wasn't stupid.

Still, he was stupid enough to ask about the carving with her name on it.

"Was that you? Did you know about that place?"

This was most likely his ears playing tricks on him (that's a symptom of sleep deprivation right?) but he swore he heard Don laugh. A joyless sound, but still a laugh.

"Yes, I did. Been a while since I've thought about it though."

Hugo paused. "There was another name, next to yours. Ulla. Do you know her?"

Don paused. "I did. But, she went missing a while back. Haven't seen her since," she spoke with practiced neutrality. Badly practiced, very unlike Don. She sounded unmoored.

Hugo said nothing, because that was all he could think to do at the moment.

The call simmered out from there.

Don gave no indication that there would be any more tasks for Hugo before Legacy Day. Best to lay low after a potential blow of cover.

In any other circumstance, a break would have been a source of glee for Hugo. Hell, today had technically been a break for him anyways (not counting detention). But now, the break being given by Don felt more like probation.

Forget his legs, Hugo felt like the floor was disappearing from under him. One mantra kept him tethered.

Hugo was a royal. He was going to sign the Storybook of Legends and get his destiny and everything would be fine. The time was soon.

Just have to make it to Legacy Day.

Same as with today's classes, with Hugo absent from them, detention came and went in silence. Afterwards, Varian took a walk to Nuru's dorm, wanting nothing more than to sit and relax with his friend. Halfway there, his mirrorphone began to ring.

Varian didn't dare look at the name on the screen. He was smart enough to understand who would be calling.

Three strikes and you're out. Varian had three detentions.

Dad must have been called.

Varian wanted to melt into the floor, but instead he just stood there, eyes screwed shut, mirrorphone gripped with white knuckles in his hand. He wanted to direct his feelings towards hating Hugo. True hate, that would be best. It felt easier than facing what was coming for him.

He tried to remember what he was planning to say in his own defense, but he was almost out of rings and if he didn't answer Dad would definitely know he was avoiding this conversation.

But hey, Varian was constantly running out of time, wasn't he? So this was nothing new.

Eyes still unopened, Varian tapped where the button must've been.

"You fucked up big time, huh?"

Varian's eyes flew open. "Uncle Hector?"

He double checked the caller ID. The confirmation let his whole stance relax.

"Yeah, it's me," Uncle Hector laughed. "First off, do I want to know?"

Varian shook his head. "No, you don't."

"Figured," Hector cackled.

A pause followed. Varian knew it was his turn to talk. "Did the school call?"

"Yeah, they did."

Varian held his breath.

"And, being me, I answered the phone. As soon as I realized who I was talking to, I had some fun and acted like I was indeed the parent they were looking for." Hector recounted the details in a mockingly serious tone, impersonating Headmaster Grimm, a stranger to him, surprisingly accurately. All the while, Hector was in hysterics, laughing like a mad man.

Varian waited for him to calm down a bit before he asked the question, forming a stone in his stomach. “Did you tell my dad?”

“Nope. He doesn’t even know they called,” Hector

Varian shook as he released his breath.

Then, Hector made a harumph noise.

“Listen,” he tried to be serious. He somewhat succeeded. “You’ve avoided the hammer for now, you can thank me later. But it is coming. I’ll spill the beans soon. At least, before we get there for the ceremony. You’ve got til then to get your shit together. You got it, nephew?”

Varian swallowed his dread. “Got it.”

“Kay. See you soon,” Hector farewelled flippantly.

The call ended with a soft click. Varian slumped, folding in on himself. He took a seat down where the wall met the floor, not caring who found him there.

Varian was an alchemist. He knew a lot of things about how the world worked, how things reacted to each other, and how disasters could be prevented. How disasters could happen to everyone and anyone.

This was not one that he knew how to prevent.

Varian was a rebel. He didn’t want to sign the Storybook of Legends. But, he was also someone’s son; a son who at his core loved his family, and his dad. There was a reason he had avoided all contact with his dad since coming to campus. One word from him, one disapproving glare, one argument he knew he’d lose, and Varian feared his convictions would collapse.

Maybe they would. Time would tell.

All Varian had was time and its shrinking hands.

Shrinking until Legacy Day had him in its jaws.

The next day, Varian and Hugo took different routes to their first class, Science and Sorcery.

They still weren’t speaking.

Normally, they walked the same path. Just cause it was easier, and the quickest way. If they happened to see each other, and spark some exchange of words pertaining to their shared subjects and interests, it was always by accident, and always full of resentment. So, obviously, neither of them noticed the absence. Nor did they miss the other’s conversation, even a little. Not even at all.

When they got to Science and Sorcery, and took their seats (separate as possible), they got through class without a word or a glance towards each other. Then, at the very late minute of that day’s session, Professor Rumpelstiltskin passed out instructions for a project.

“You’ll have until tomorrow’s class to complete this assignment.” A chorus of outraged groans followed. Legacy Day was in a matter of days. No one wanted to think about a project on top of that kind of stress. “If you work diligently,” the professor said. “This shouldn’t be a problem.”

None of the disappointment came from the roommates.

Varian was excited for the challenge.

Hugo knew he’d had worse deadlines.

Even if both of them were still coming off of the stress from the same professor’s test in another class with him as instructor, Chemythstry. This, they both secretly hoped, would be a better chance to show their stuff.

Now would be a good time to warn you: the universe has a sick sense of humor.

The professor coughed. “You will also be assigned into pairs.”

Now *that* got Varian upset. He really didn’t feel like working with someone right now. Plus, since he was the best student (with one possible exception, who shall remain nameless), he’d probably end up pulling the majority of the weight.

Varian waited patiently for his name to be called.

Eventually, there remained only a few options left of students not called out.

Then even fewer.

Then fewer.

Then.

Varian froze. *He called Hugo’s name already, with someone else to be his project partner, right?*

“Varian Gale & Hugo Cast.”

Shit.

Chapter End Notes

AAAAAAAAAAAA this chapter turned out so much longer than I thought it was going to be oh my GOOOOOOOOD. Just about 10,000 words holy shit.

Hope y’all enjoyed!! Kudos and comments are always welcome. NOW GO DRINK SOME WATER LIKE I AM RIGHT NOW! I’M DRINKING AS I TYPE. IT’S SPILLING ONTO MY COMPUTER AAAAAAAAAA

Project Part 1

Chapter Summary

Legacy Day approaches. As Varian struggles with dread over his destiny, and Hugo fears that his destiny will be taken from him, both roommates are left to ponder their pasts, presents, and potential futures.

...

And also they're stuck doing a project together. What could possibly do wrong? :D

Content warning: This chapter contains some discussions of death/death-like topics.

Chapter Notes

Y'all have no idea how long I've been thinking about this chapter and the next one. This part of the story has been pushed back and forth and around and over and over until it has FINALLY been set in stone. The backstory dumps (and more) are here everyone. I hope you all enjoy it!

ALSO THANK YOU FOR 4,000 HITS!!!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“What?!”

Varian jumped to his feet. He turned and saw Hugo had done the same, looking equally, if not more distressed than he was.

“Both of you sit down!” The Science and Sorcery professor, Rumpelstiltskin, shouted back. The roommates ignored this request.

“You can’t be serious about this!” Varian and Hugo spoke over each other. “Are you sure you didn’t just say the wrong names?”

The professor silenced them with a wave of his hand. A volume muting spell, one both students were familiar with (Varian from readings, Hugo from experience). Unfortunately, they were so caught up in their outrage, it took both students a full minute to realize the spell had been cast at all.

While their shouts were gone, this did nothing to stop their thoughts on being partnered together for this important project.

In a sense, both had the same issue with this arrangement. Getting out of the tunnel was one thing. That was working together for an impersonal goal. Hell, even rooming together could be tolerated,

with the distance they kept between themselves. But this was SCIENCE! And they were rivals. They had enough on their individual plates already, and now this?

Oh my god, Varian thought. *This is going to be hell.*

Needless to say, they weren't going down without a fight.

As soon as class ended, both roommates rushed to the professor, who had the good sense to pack his things and walk straight out the door. Unfortunately, the two followed him.

"Professor, you have to switch us to different partners," Hugo insisted.

"For both our sakes! We just work better when we're, um," Varian paused. "Competing."

Professor Rumpelstiltskin kept walking.

"It won't work," Varian stated.

"I second that," Hugo nodded.

At last, the professor stopped walking. He turned halfway towards his two students, with an expression of cold exhaustion.

"Make it work."

For the first time ever, Varian and Hugo sat together at lunch.

There was a silent understanding between them to simply get this project over with as soon as possible, with as little conversation as possible.

Obviously, they forgot about this understanding almost immediately.

"Make it work," Varian grumbled, imitating the professor's tone. "What a load of shit," he said, setting up his notebooks.

Hugo did the same, humming at the shorter student's words. "Overdramatic is what I'd call it. He acts like this is gonna be easy. Has he thought about how bad pairing us up will be? For even a second?"

"Exactly!" Varian emphasized. "We're all conflict, no conclusions. Even in the best case scenarios. You literally got upset when I put out a fire on your clothes once! The first day, actually. Remember?"

Hugo averted eye contact. "Not particularly."

"My point is, we just can't collaborate," Varian shook his head. "What's with that guy?"

"Some people don't have an eye for interpersonal dynamics," Hugo stated.

"You can say that again," Varian shrugged, in full agreement.

The irony was lost on them.

With the table set (notebooks opened, food trays pushed to the side to be picked at over time, and the two roommates across from one another), the two settled into science-mode.

Now would be a good time to explain the goal of this dreaded group project.

The goal of the project was straightforward: create a method or tool by which to transform a substance into the three states of matter (solid, liquid, and gas), thrice over, before completely vanishing. It was meant to test both their problem solving skills and how creative they could be in coming up with a solution to the conundrum. A surprisingly more complex task than first appeared, since there wasn't an exact spell to do this. They were given free-reign to complete the project in any manner that was successful (and safe).

"Seems easy enough," Hugo tapped his pencil against the instructions on the paper. "But, if we really want this to be high quality, we'll need some," Hugo paused, momentarily blanking on the word. He found it a moment later.

"Hydrochloric acid." Varian's voice overlapped with Hugo's.

Hugo blinked. "Yeah."

"And," Varian spoke quickly, "I guess we'll also need..."

Hugo saw where he was going with his words and jumped in. "Nitric acid," the two said simultaneously.

Varian huffed out a laugh. "Of course, if we were crazy enough, we could also throw in some benzene? Try to get the solution to also become plasma, the fourth state of matter."

Hugo half-grinned. "You're really dying to let this blow up in our faces, aren't you?"

Varian balanced his head in his hands. "It's rude to bring up a scientist's failures."

"I'm sorry," Hugo laughed. "Who just mentioned me setting my pants on fire a minute ago?"

"You brought it up this time, not me," Varian said, sporting a prideful smile.

A ghost of a smile crossed Hugo's mug, before souring suddenly. "We're wasting time."

"Right," Varian groaned. "Why do some professors assign projects at the worst possible times? He must talk to the other professors. Doesn't he know no one else is assigning stuff like this right now? And only giving us a day and night to get it done!"

"Probably assigned it for exactly that reason," Hugo posited, half-listening as he re-examined his notes. "He knows we have the time now. Time we're supposed to be using to prepare for Legacy Day."

Varian then felt like sinking into the floor. He was trying hard not to think about that day.

Luckily, the Castleteria was full of distractions.

"Varian!" A voice yelled out.

The roommates then saw Yong hurrying up to their table. In his hands was a lunch tray. He set it on the table with a careless thud.

“Are we sitting here today?” Yong asked, all smiles.

Varian rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m a little busy today.”

Hugo coughed, before turning from his work and taking a swig of his water. Yong turned to him. Then, back to Varian. Then to Hugo. Then to Varian.

A look of recognition and embarrassment overcame Yong.

“Am I interrupting your date?”

Varian pretended to gag. Almost violently so.

Hugo really did gag. Well, choke on the water he’d been drinking.

Yong looked between the panicked pair and grew more bewildered.

In the midst of this chaos, Nuru approached the table. She looked amongst the trio, already attempting to contain her laughter. “What’s up with them?” She asked Yong directly.

Yong winced. “I think I barged in on their date.”

Nuru failed to keep containing her laughter.

While Hugo struggled to clear his throat of water, Varian regained his ability to speak.

“Not a date! Definitely not a date,” Varian said. “He’s not my type.”

Hugo, still hunched over and hacking coughing, immediately flipped his middle finger at his roommate.

“An easy mistake to make,” Nuru, delighted, said.

Yong laughed, twiddling with his hands. “Hey, it’s not my fault I’m a little dense. I’m destined to literally not have a brain,” he said, almost proud.

Varian froze at the reminder of their shared story. He shook himself, trying to seem unaffected. “Do you two want to hang out tomorrow?”

Nuru frowned. “Sorry Varian, but I’m stuck with the Royal Student Council after school today and tomorrow. We’re in charge of decorating for the Legacy Day ceremony. After that I’ll be stuck with my family.”

“And my parents are coming here tomorrow too,” Yong said, bouncing in place. “I’m not signing this year, duh, but they wanted to stay for the weekend to see me and watch the ceremony.”

Varian froze again. Yet another unfortunate truth. “Good luck,” he muttered out, managing to passably come across as unbothered as they walked away.

“Bye story-buddy!” Yong yelled. Varian forced a smile. Yong saw through it. “I mean, bye not-story-buddy!”

Varian tried to appreciate the support.

As Varian looked at Yong, the future scarecrow, worry overcame him.

Yong’s initial reaction to Varian being a rebel was definitely one of surprise. But, once the dust settled, the middle schooler mostly seemed to forget all about it. Varian could understand why. Yong wouldn’t have to sign until he was a senior, like Varian. That reality was far on the horizon for the boy.

But not for Varian.

Varian was a Rebel, meaning he did not want to sign the Storybook of Legends. When Legacy Day came, he planned to follow through with that wish.

However, the lead up to Legacy Day was not one that he enjoyed.

To be honest, Varian had no idea what would happen when he finally got up on that stage. He hoped his courage would stick with him, but he couldn’t be sure yet. For a few reasons. The most recent of which was the concept of disappearing; going ‘poof’, as Headmaster Grimm phrased it.

“If you don’t sign the Storybook of Legends, your story ceases to exist. Thus, you, and everyone involved in your story, will vanish from existence . Or, as you put it, go ‘poof’. It would be as though you never existed at all.”

Those were the Headmaster’s exact words.

Varian remembered them, turned over in his brain, round and round, considered the details, the repercussions (and who would suffer them) if they were true. But what to do with those words? He wasn’t sure.

Mom certainly made her choice.

She signed the book, did her story, and came back home. It wasn’t long before she met Dad, passing through with his brother and sister. Then came Varian.

Varian grew up knowing his mother was a deeply unhappy person. Not in the sense that she disliked her family (so many extended cousins passed throughout Varian’s childhood; it was always a big family). She loved them all. She loved her son most of all. But she also loved science, magic, and alchemy. Just like Varian did. They were alike in almost every way.

Varian used to unconditionally love that fact, even while knowing its connection to her constant restlessness and dissatisfaction with life. Now, with his future looming over him, like her future did for her, Varian found himself resenting it. He resented that he resented it. He wished he could talk to her about it.

Varian would never know what was the final straw for her. But, one day, she was there and the next she wasn’t. For many years, her son had over-thought those last moments with her.

“ I’ll write often,” she had said, slinging her bag over her shoulder. *“I’ll explain everything when I come home.”* Her goggles were high atop her head.

Varian had stood there staring. Small and confused. Mom didn't ever go on trips. Dorothy didn't leave home after her story finished. Where was she going? Why now? For what reason?

Ulla must have seen it all in his expression, because before he could begin to ask any of his many questions, she slipped her goggles from her hair, knelt down, and gently put them on his head.

"Hang onto those for me, will ya?" She had cooed, making quick work of adjusting the straps to fit his small skull. *"I'll want them back when I come home."*

And then she didn't.

Later, Dad had told Varian that she left on some mission of scientific discovery, but for what goal he didn't know (or wouldn't say).

The general consensus of the adults in Varian's life came to be that she was straying from her destiny by leaving the farm. Dad always said it was the science at home that weakened the promise made on Legacy Day, and the leaving for the sake of it that was the big break. So, the universe corrected itself, removed the inconsistency, and now she was gone.

Varian had lived with that knowledge. The data of what happened after signing and breaking from destiny was clear enough that he couldn't find fault in it. He'd been there.

But going poof? What proof was there that going poof by not signing would truly happen? If it was really like never existing in the first place, then any evidence of it happening would paradoxically be non-existent.

If going poof was a real possibility, then the threat of it taking everyone with it seemed to only exist *before* someone signed the Storybook of Legends. After that, if you broke from your destiny, the only one at risk of disappearing was yourself. An all or nothing risk, with an uncertain likelihood of happening vs a single person risk with a complete certainty of happening.

Varian wanted to be an alchemist. If he signed, he never would be. Dorothy couldn't be one.

Varian did not want to sign the Storybook of Legends.

But still... Was Varian willing to take that risk? To risk everyone?

"Hey," Hugo said, cutting straight through Varian's spiraling thoughts. "You good?"

Varian swayed in his seat. For a moment, he let his head hang down, weightless. He felt as though the floor was holding his feet in place. He was stuck.

Grasping for something to center him back to reality, Varian just stared at Hugo.

Hugo, great mind in his own right. Varian was smart enough to know that he was jealous of him at times, that much was obvious. But underneath that, even now, he found himself comforted for his presence, both in the moment and in general. While the world may end up going without an alchemist like Varian because of destiny, he took some silent comfort in knowing Hugo would be there *because* of destiny.

Varian tried to focus on that feeling, that admiration, more than anything else.

It was easy.

...

EASY?

Well, that certainly brought Varian back to reality.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Varian breathed out, trying to remind himself that Hugo was annoying and rude and that he did not like him a bit.

Hugo looked him over, but said nothing more on the matter. “I was just saying we’ll need supplies. We should stop by L.A.B. after school,” he repeated himself.

Varian groaned at the prospect. Normally, such a shopping trip would be enjoyable. But with the blond there... “Can’t we do that separately?” he proposed.

Hugo seemed to feel a similar aggravation. But, “I want to think we’re a little smarter than that, Freckles. We only have one day to get this done. Let’s get it done *right* .”

Varian sighed. This day truly felt never ending. A part of him tried to appreciate that. The more time dragged out, the longer Varian had to truly be himself. Not Dorothy. Just Varian.

Only speaking intermediately, Hugo and Varian roamed the aisles of the Book End store L.A.B. (the Lair-Essentials and Broom-Repair store).

As they did, the many chemicals and vials and beakers and burners reminded Hugo of home, of his mother Donella, and of Don knowing about his recent thieving blunder.

Okay, maybe he was already thinking about all that.

Despite his cavalier attitude, and seeming focus on the project he and Goggles were undertaking, all Hugo could think about was his now possibly perilous future.

Hugo had come too far, worked too hard, given too much to lose it all now at the *goddamn finish line* . But what could he do? Any sudden move, any out of the ordinary desperate action to cover up the crime may be the thing that actually does get him caught. There was a chance nothing would come of this anyway! If Mrs. Her Majesty the White Queen had simply moved on and said nothing about the hand mirror she’d found in his possession (technically Varian’s hands), then he was in the clear.

Best to wait.

Hugo was so very good at waiting, and at not doing anything stupid in times of panic.

Almost as if by magic, Hugo found his mind pulled back to Don’s lab, all those years ago, now a series of memories

He was so small back then, all skin and bone. Poverty would do that. Especially when you were amongst the unimportant masses. For as long as he could remember, he knew that he was not a priority for anyone. Leaving the orphanage of his early childhood was the result of realizing if he was going to have a future, he couldn’t wait for a fairytale like royalty did. Like Queen Snow White did.

All that power and happiness, and did she truly use it for the betterment of others? In Hugo's experience, the answer would be no.

He remembered it all. The first time he snuck into Donella the Sorcerer's lab. It was empty and quiet. No food in sight, but it had a sink with running water. The second time, someone had left some bread there. Too young and foolish to think anything of it, he'd taken it without a thought, at all scared. What did scare him, though, was the sound of footsteps at the door. He had bolted out the door as fast as he could. He got away with it that time. The third time, some weeks later, with a bit of his strength back and increasingly more confidence in his ability to survive, he had made himself at home in the lab.

The place belonging to someone so powerful did not deter him. Maybe it should have.

He had seen enough when he cased the place to find out the Sorcerer was up to something illegal, such as, just spitballing here, a criminal organization for procuring magical items that were not up for sale (spoiler: Hugo had in fact figured that out).

In any case, that didn't concern him at the time. His priorities were less complex.

He thought that, perhaps, one of those old books in this lab of hers could have some kind of creation spell, or something. He had quite a low imagination back then. All he wanted to create was food, water, but more importantly some money. If he could steal it he would, but if he didn't have to that would be better. If he could just get on his own two feet, he would be okay.

Of course, he failed that spell. The explosion it caused (which knocked him to the floor) was more than loud enough to get the attention of the Sorcerer. She had him in a freezing spell right as he stood up, before he could even think of running. That spell was probably the only thing that kept him from shaking out of his skin in terror.

For however intimidating Don was today, she was triple so when he was smaller.

To this day, Hugo has no clue what prompted Donella's next words. Perhaps she thought he might know too much; might have already figured out her criminal activities in his snooping, and needed incentive to not report on her. Perhaps she just needed a successor and decided to not look a gift horse in the mouth. Perhaps she pitied him.

Whatever it was, her next words froze him more than any spell could.

"How would you like a destiny?"

Hugo had said nothing, so she continued.

"I have a proposition for you, kid. I want my secrets kept, and you want to not-get-arrested. Turn me in, and your reward will be nothing but a pat on the back from the same royal idiots who are content leaving you with nothing. Stick with me, and I'll give you a destiny. My destiny. I need a Sorcerer's Apprentice, and you need a rescue. It's your choice."

And Hugo asked. "Does the Sorcerer ever go hungry?"

And Donella responded. "That is not their destiny."

And Hugo decided then and there.

And he never looked back.

Just have to make it to Legacy Day. Hugo had repeated this to himself so many times it was threatening to make him nauseous. But, it kept him on the ground, and out of his own head.

Today, that wasn't doing the trick. Strangely, what did instead was the sound of Varian's voice.

"Nitric acid?"

Hugo managed to shake himself off his zoned-out-ness. "Check."

"A few extra beakers?"

"Got it."

"Pinchbeck metal for testing?"

"Acquired in spades," Hugo hummed.

"Way more than we need," Varian muttered.

"I've been meaning to buy some extra metals anyway," Hugo justified. That seemed to finish the issue for now.

Silence followed. The lull was just long enough that Hugo returned to his thoughts, losing focus on everything else.

Varian's eyes hovered over the list. He frowned, noting that they would only have enough supplies for one go at making the solution. "Should we get extra containers of the..." he trailed off, realizing Hugo was barely paying attention. Rolling his eyes, he huffed out a short cough.

Right on cue, Hugo noticed his staring. "What?"

Varian scoffed. "Nevermind. I'll take that as a no." Varian checked the list for the last time. One try would be enough. Barring any disaster, their idea would work. He was sure of that.

With that all squared away, the silence felt strange. The shorter student snuck a glance towards his roommate. Something about him felt off. Sure, that had been the case even since that night with the tunnel. But this felt more focused, almost crystalized. Unbeknownst to Hugo, it unsettled Varian.

"Are you okay?" Varian asked, genuine in some uncertain way.

"Peachy." Hugo said, already zoning back out.

They were relieved to find that L.A.B. had everything they needed from their project list. By that point, Hugo had managed to avoid running into any shelves or walls, despite his cloudy mind. He tried to relish the normalcy of this scenario. It was a good distraction from the dread. But every movement felt like it was in slow motion. Every turn is a potential moment for disaster. A minute where things could go wrong. A chance for the sky to fall and crush him under its weight.

Hugo couldn't tell whether Varian's presence made the day better or worse. Most likely worse. Hugo chose to believe the latter, and some part of him knew it was a conscious choice. There was too much on his mind today to think about the very real alternative.

The least Hugo could do for Don now was keep Varian, the other witness to his blunder, at arm's length, like he'd been told to do. Like he'd been trying to do. Like he'd been forgetting to try to do.

Yeah, forgetting.

Varian and Hugo, for reasons each their own, had always done their sciences and the like on their own or under the instruction of others. Never with a partner. Never with an equal. Neither were equipped to think of the other as an equal, even now. They were rivals, even when it didn't suit the moment. This made the nitty-gritty work difficult.

Additionally, the realities of the project remained more challenging than they had anticipated. The work took painstaking amounts of time to prep the materials, let alone come up with the initial plan. Had they not planned at lunch, this would have taken them far into the night, maybe even into the morning. It was already dark out as it stood. Neither of them wanted to risk losing that kind of race against time.

On top of all of that, the two roommates had elected to work in separate silence. This made things a bit inconvenient. Not simply because of the work itself, but also for how the silence added to their worries.

Their minds were perpetually elsewhere, as increasing exhaustion amplified and dulled them in the worst ways, turning everything around them rotten, including each other. The atmosphere it created was as palpable as a smell.

Varian watched himself as if out of his own body. It occurred to him somewhere during the night that this was going to be the last big Science and Sorcery assignment he took part in before Legacy Day. He would still be in the class after that day, since graduation was still some time away, but a part of him felt it would be emptier afterwards, particularly if he did sign the Storybook. The finality was not lost on him. He also figured, bitterly, that not much would change for Hugo. He tried to focus on the task at hand.

Meanwhile, Hugo was doing everything in his power to think only about the project. Not Legacy Day, so close but still feeling like a million miles away. Not Donella, and her abject disappointment in him after his slip up. Certainly not Goggles, and how illogical his views on the upcoming day were, and how that made him feel. The work provided a necessary distraction from everything. He tried to be grateful for that.

Hugo re-did his ponytail. He had already examined the results he'd made a few times. Then, Varian coughed and looked at him expectantly, and Hugo caved.

"Okay," Hugo sighed, rubbing his forehead and forcing down any sluggishness in his tone. "I've got my side of the solution done."

"Good," Varian said. "I've got mine ready too."

Hugo was about to say something, but Varian continued talking.

"I mean, I've had it done for a while. I was just about to ask if you wanted help with yours."

Hugo grimaced. “In that case, why don’t I do the final mixing and solidifying. It’s a delicate process and clearly,” he laid on the mockery thick. “You’ve been working hard.”

Hugo stood slowly.

Varian bolted out of his chair.

“Not a chance,” Varian took hold of Hugo’s vial before he could stop him.

“I’ve got this,” Varian insisted. He took both vials in his hands and slowly began pouring them into the larger glass.

“Can you just let me do this?” Hugo asked, exacerbad. “I could use the distraction.”

“Yeah, well so could I,” Varian held onto the materials tighter, finally finishing the pouring. He waited for the mixture to solidify before bringing it over to the burner. He watched carefully. This part of the process would require his utmost attention. Only after this could the re-liquidified, heated solution be useful to them. Right now, it was at its most dangerous.

Hugo crossed his arms. “Listen, I’m not saying I don’t trust you on this. You’re smart,” Hugo tried not to recoil into himself. “Which means you should be smart enough to leave this to me.”

Varian said nothing, his attention held on the beaker.

Hugo grit his teeth. “All this dedication, and it’s not even your destiny,” he said, matter-of-factly. There was no obvious bite in his tone.

Regardless, Varian didn’t see it that way.

“I’m not even going to sign the book, so what does my destiny matter?” Varian shouted, his sudden shift in tone bringing everything but the burner to a frigid state.

Hugo flinched at his volume. He sounded as though he had something to prove. More so to himself than anyone else, but Hugo didn’t pick up on that. “I’m aware,” he said bitterly. “That’s all you seem to talk about. But I still have more experience than you in this regard, so stop being stubborn.”

“I am not stubborn.”

“Says you. But you sure as hell act like it.”

Varian glared at Hugo. “I do not!”

“Then maybe you’re not as smart as I thought,” Hugo shot back.

“You wanna do this so bad?” Varian took his eyes off the solution. “Fine!”

Without warning, the contents above the burner burst into smoke and filled the room. Eyes already protected by their goggles (Varian’s old one’s and Hugo’s spiked ones), the two students rushed to cover their coughing mouths. Varian death-gripping the farm’s bandana around his neck up to his nose, while Hugo settled for the collar of his shirt. At the same time, they scrambled to move the smoke out the window, grabbing blankets and brooms.

As the dust cleared, the substance disappeared with it.

Both roommates came to the same realization at that moment: Not only did they NOT have the extra materials necessary to repeat the plan they had laid out, but they certainly didn't have the time. It was already so late.

The project had failed.

"Great," Varian said, lifting his goggles from his eyes. "Just great," he said, fuming.

Hugo took a deep breath, tossing his own goggles onto the desk with a resounding thud, replacing them on his face with his glasses. "Well I, for one, am nothing but surprised," he said, sarcasm dripping from his voice. "I mean, who would've expected that trying to micromanage and mutter your way through the steps like this would result in disaster?"

Varian turned to him. "Gee, sorry I was trying to take what little chances I have to do what I love. Unlike you. Gosh, you'll never have another chance to do this kind of stuff again!" He added his own sarcasm.

Hugo groaned. "Is this what this is about? Your obsession with this stuff?"

"It's not an obsession."

"Yeah, it's more like an addiction. One that's going to hurt you and everyone around you."

Varian scoffed. But he was given no chance to speak.

Hugo kept talking.

"You have a happily ever after! You do! I know you don't think of it as one, but you get a family, and a home, and security within that home. And you don't even want it!" Hugo took a shaky breath. "What is wrong with you?"

For both of them, these thoughts had been simmering since their exchange of words (to put it lightly) in the tunnels.

Now, it was all coming out.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think you wanted to trade, your highness," Varian was nothing but acidic in his tone.

"Not a chance, farm boy," Hugo said, with all the seriousness in the world. "Some of us don't have the luxury of being upset with the limitations destiny might have. Some of us take whatever we can get. If I can bury any jealousy I have, so can you."

Varian softened. *Jealousy?* Mind moving a mile a minute, Varian moved forward. "But what if we didn't have to?"

"What?" Hugo stopped.

Varian held himself firmly. "What if we didn't have to only take what we were given?"

"Don't be stupid, there could be worse things."

“There could also be better things.”

Hugo stared him down, but more so at everything he wished he didn't have to claw and scrap to have.

Varian stared back, but more so at the everything he knew would never be permitted to be.

“Destiny is not a safety cushion, it's a knife to your back,” Varian started, words as sharp as the metaphor he employed. “It sets the stage, cues the lights, and tells you to play your part and dance, and if you don't you disappear. A life without destiny is a life that's *yours* .”

“You wouldn't get sliced if you didn't lean into the blade,” Hugo immediately countered. “Only an idiot would throw away everything destiny can give for a consultation prize like knowing what's 'yours'. You'd know that if you ever experienced having nothing. And I do mean *nothing* .”

“You can get something without destiny. You can still be a sorcerer, and I can be—”

“But not *the* Sorcerer,” Hugo cut him off. “Not one with a place in the world waiting to be had.”

“But what if you didn't want to be the Sorcerer? One day, you decided ‘well this actually isn't for me. Whoops?’ Destiny would fucking kill you from trying to be anything else in your life!” Varian spoke like he knew.

Hugo drew back. “Kill me? What are you talking about? First off, I wouldn't want to be anything else. It's the life I want. Second, and most importantly, I'll live. *You'll* live. We have to live,” Hugo said as if it were as simple as that. Both because the alternative was not even a possibility in his mind, and because it was not a possibility he wanted to entertain. He would be fine. Varian would be fine. He had to be.

Just have to make it to Legacy Day.

“Just like my predecessor before me, and yours before you. We accept what we've got and move forward. That is the deal. That is our lot in life.” Hugo sounded like he was pleading; because he was. But for who? “Everyone accepts that eventually.”

Generously, Varian's mind filled in the blank he saw.

Not Mom.

“Shut up,” Varian spit out at Hugo, his voice full, his breathing suddenly so uneven.

Not you either, Varian. You're just like her.

“Shut up.” Varian said, no longer directed at Hugo. His brain did not shut up. It set the stage, cued the lights, and told him exactly what he didn't want to hear.

If you sign, you'll eventually walk out and disappear like she did. If you don't sign, you and everyone else might disappear anyway.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

Everything felt loud and suffocating.

Varian's hands came up to cover his face, swallowing a deep gulp of air, like swallowing vomit. "Mom couldn't accept it either."

"What are you—" Hugo's voice lost any of its previous power as he realized what he was witnessing.

Varian was crying.

The image felt wrong in every way. Most of all, because Hugo felt responsible for it happening.

Hugo's throat felt closed shut.

Varian began to pace. He seemed physically lost. His whole demeanor was brimming with terror. He was turned away from Hugo.

"Hey, Varian," Hugo put his hand on his shoulder.

Varian swung around so fast it nearly gave the blond whiplash. That didn't do it though. What actually did that was the hand that Varian threw at him. Right at his face.

Varian gasped worse than Hugo did.

"I didn't mean— I didn't mean to—" Varian's voice got worse. More hoarse.

"Shit," Hugo held the spot that bore the brunt of it.

"I'm sorry," Varian breathed out, fully shaking. Face wet with tears. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Then he sprinted out the door.

Chapter End Notes

Hugo, watching that blind, panicked punch come in: "Damn. He really about to rock my shit."

Did you enjoy the new chapter? :D Did you like the angst? :D I sure enjoyed writing it! :D (I am in as much pain as you are. Happier times are on the horizon.)

As usual, kudos and comments are always welcome! Remember to take care of yourselves, get some sleep, and DRINK LOTS OF WATER!!!!

Project Part 2

Chapter Summary

Varian and Hugo are left to clean up their mess. Or not.

Chapter Notes

Hope y'all can forgive me for that last chapter. Today, I offer you this. Tomorrow? Who knows. (yes that's a meme)

Anywho, I hope you like this chapter. I think you will!!! Enjoy!!!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

All was quiet at Ever After High. Most were asleep, almost all were in their dorms, the world continued to turn.

Alone, Varian ran down the halls.

He ran, and ran until he couldn't breathe. He didn't even have the sense to determine where exactly in the school he had ended up. Completely directionless, he finally doubled over in exhaustion in a darkened hallway of lockers, wheezing as he held himself upright by hunching on his knees.

The sound of his own inhaled and exhaled echoed sickeningly around him. Varian could not escape the bubbling, clawing distress in his gut. He needed to get it out.

Still choking on air, Varian kicked at the locker next to him.

The resounding *boom* noise it made left him shaking even harder, doing nothing to help his scattered state of mind. His panic rose once again.

Desperate for reprieve, Varian practically collapsed onto the hallway floor, his back pressed against the cool metal of the lockers.

Slowly, his eyes adjusted to the dark. Varian took note of the little things around him. A lost earring on the ground. A locker covered in yellow sunflowers and peace signs. The smell of cleaning products (the janitor must have been through a few hours ago). The faint feeling of the wind coming from somewhere far away. The moonlight and distant street lamp lights that filtered in from somewhere more far away. The door across from him.

His own hands.

Even as his breathing balanced itself, tentatively, Varian's mind was bombarded. He had almost forgotten what that felt like. To swing at someone.

Varian clutched his stomach.

This swing, this time, was out of panic. A blind, immediate response, one that he already knew he never wanted to replicate. When he was younger, when he was so familiar with that old feeling, it had been much, much more intentional.

His head was swimming in memories he did not want to remember. Memories of before he met Rapunzel and Cassandra, when he wasn't coping well at all. Mom was gone, and Varian felt so much hurt that he directed it at everyone, willing to strike out at anything. Even after meeting his soon to be friends, that hurt did not cease.

It ended with blood. The last fight he ever got in, when he fought so hard the other person ended up bleeding. Snapped Varian out of his funk enough to cut the bullshit all together. He stopped fighting, stopped talking to everyone (except maybe Ruddiger). It was a miracle he didn't go entirely emotionally numb after the guilt hit him. He had his friends to thank for that. That's what friends are for.

Varian was reminded of his phone in his pocket, but made no move to take it out. He didn't feel like talking to any of his friends right then. He didn't want them to know about this. He knew they'd listen, and they'd understand, but he couldn't...

The only person he wanted to talk to was...

I wonder if Hugo is okay. Varian thought. *What do we even say to each other after that?*

Varian began to feel his own tears threatened to spill again.

He looked back at the door across from him. He recognized that door. He shook himself and stood. He peered in through the door's window. Although the room was only lit by a small stove light that someone must have forgotten to turn off, Varian recognized it as the cooking class-ic classroom. Rapunzel's favorite class. Then again, every other day she decided she had a new favorite class. Varian knew she had a particular fondness for this one, though, if only because she got to make snacks to bring to her friends afterwards.

The door was unlocked, thankfully. Reminded now, Varian remembered his first week living with Hugo, when he would sneak off to find late night snacks (who knows from where?) when Varian had told the blond that he'd *"pour acid on you if you ever try to involve me in your two AM activities, Glasses."*

Remind Varian to never open his big stupid mouth again.

Or swing his arms around.

Once inside, Varian started cooking. He settled on making himself a late-night breakfast, here in this dimly lit kitchen. He wasn't even hungry, but he needed an outlet. Anyway, cooking was kind of like alchemy. All the same measuring and timing and heating and cooling and trying not to blow it all up. And at the end you could eat the results!

Mom thought the same way about it. Maybe that was just her way of coping too.

Even now, as the memory of Ulla threatened to throw him once again into his grief, alchemy calmed Varian down. It steadied him, even when he was so acutely aware that it was the linchpin of

his future misery.

He wasn't going to think about it. Not right now.

He wasn't.

But then he did. He did so for so long that the eggs started burning. Varian hurriedly pushed the pan off the stove. Waving away any smoke on impulse. There was none, they were just really crispy eggs.

Varian leaned against the counter, dropping his head into his hands.

What a mess.

Still, Varian couldn't bring himself to go back to his dorm. He couldn't face his roommate yet. Picking up his head, Varian restarted the cooking process, his feet staying firmly in their place.

The lights of the dorm were harsh and bright. They had never bothered Hugo before. They did now.

Staring up at them from where he lay on his bed, Hugo found himself thinking about them with an intensity that he had not known himself capable of. His focus was so preoccupied with these inanimate lights, that he barely paid attention to Olivia tugging at his hair, now loose from his ponytail. At least she wasn't playing with his glasses, tossed half-hazardly on the desk.

Other than thinking about the lights, Hugo really wasn't thinking about much.

Nope. Not thinking of much at all.

Hugo's hand nursed his cheek, absentmindedly.

Truly, his head had never felt *so* empty!

...

Anywho, past his own denial, there were, in fact, a myriad of emotions running through his mind.

Hugo was a goal oriented person. When he had a goal, he did what it took to reach it.

This attitude carried over to his emotional complications.

When he was younger, and still new to living with Donella, Hugo learned fast that if he didn't have his shit together, no one was going to be there to carry his weight. He'd never been good at burying his emotions, like Don and Cyrus. They could handle anything. Hugo was less lucky in that regard.

So, Hugo learned to catalog his feelings. He liked to imagine looking down at a plain manila folder, with each paper inside being something he was feeling. He would flip through them, see that they were there, give a cold nod (quite similar to the ones Don dished out on the regular), then, rational as he'd been taught to be, file them away in the cabinet that was his brain.

Which is totally a lot healthier than going numb and definitely not a different form of avoiding his feelings by trying to reason through them rather than feel them.

Funnily enough, he hadn't really felt the need to use this old mental trick since he'd come to school this year.

Well, now he did.

Thanks to Varian. He thought.

The imaginary file was opened. The first document was anger.

The nerve of that guy! Who goes around swinging at people when they start freaking out? Terrible swing too. Hugo knew good fighting form, and that was not it. That was blind desperation, pure and simple. His face didn't even hurt (it was a terrible swing; all panic, no power behind it) but that didn't mean he wasn't mad as hell about it. As he should be!

So, that was the anger. Away it went into the file.

Behind that was a document of perplexment; dare it be called a morbid curiosity. Why the big reaction? In particular, why did Varian mention his mother? Hugo knew from Don that Goggles' mom, Ulla, was missing, although from what he couldn't—

Varian's voice entered his mind.

"Mom couldn't accept it either."

Hugo's thoughts turned to static.

Did her disappearance have to do with her destiny?

That would explain more than a few things about Varian, if it was true. Still, Hugo couldn't be sure.

Had Hugo unknowingly crossed some line by even talking about it? Hugo could not bring himself to feel entirely bad for doing so. How could he have known in the first place?

But still, a thin, crumbled document appeared from behind perplexment: guilt.

Did Hugo wish he'd known in the first place? Would he have done anything different?

It didn't matter. Any guilt he experienced was eclipsed by the knowledge that Varian should be the one bearing more of the guilt.

His brain threatened to flip back to fury.

Then, Hugo's mind rebelled against him, recalling the image of Varian before he ran. Tears on his face. Guilt so clear in his expression that it left Hugo physically staggering the second Varian left the room.

He tried immediately to treat this image as a document, like everything else. But, it was more like he had discovered the picture on the floor, just out of reach, rather than in the imaginary file.

Fighting with himself, he imagined himself picking up the picture, intent on slotting it away and forgetting about it.

But he could not ignore the unwritten emotion it stirred in him; absent from the safety of the file, but oh so obvious in himself when he recalled Varian crying.

More intensely than everything else Hugo had felt was: surprise.

Surprise at his roommate crying, surprise at the panicking, surprise at the swing, surprise at the “I’m sorry”’s, and surprise at the feeling of surprise itself.

This was Varian. Someone who Hugo barely knew. It wasn’t like they ever really talked. So why did his distress surprise him? Why did it feel wrong?

Unwilling to entertain this train of thought any further, Hugo imagined slamming said file shut.

Suddenly, a sense of *deja vu* hit him. He’d been here before, the first night he’d been in the dorm with Varian. They’d argued, Varian had run away, and Hugo had stayed where he was. He’d done nothing then either.

Hugo didn’t have to do anything now, either.

He didn’t have to wait around for an apology from him. He didn’t have to apologize himself. They could forget about this.

Hugo could truly, finally follow Don’s advice of staying distant from his roommate. He really should follow Don’s advice, now more than ever. His future could still go up in smoke if his recent thieving blunder truly did get him caught. He had elected to lay low in that situation. He could do the same here. Hugo didn’t have to do anything to fix this rift. Varian could essentially be out of Hugo’s life if they both just let this be the final straw.

It would be easy.

He could just stay staring up at these lights, in silence.

Hugo was used to silence. He worked in silence, he lived in silence. Silence was good. Silence meant that the jobs were done, the imaginary files (and complex feelings) were out of sight, and Don was happy. For most of his life, silence was his sign of peace.

But this time, silence felt hammering. Jagged-edged. Just plain old bad; because now Hugo did not feel at peace.

The file didn’t help at all.

Hugo felt awful. God, he felt *awful*.

This was not the kind of awful that accompanied disappointment when he upset Don, or Cyrus, or any old stranger. Again, this was Varian. Someone who Hugo...

Oh fuck.

Hugo had no idea when it happened. But, somewhere between their first meeting and now, Hugo moved beyond tolerating and simply enjoying messing with Varian.

Hugo liked being around him. Varian was annoying and self-assured and strange. But he also had his smarts, his stubbornness, the faces he made when he was mad (funny mad; it never felt that serious before), his Varian-ness, which showed in everything he did and said.

Hugo might even say that he wanted to be a friend of Varian's, if that didn't sound stupid to even think about. More likely, Hugo just liked having him around, hearing his voice fill the space.

Varian was... something.

That feeling didn't belong in a file, imaginary or no.

Oh FUCK.

Hugo kept staring up at the ceiling; at those dull, bright lights. He stared and stared and stared and...

The lights overhead were really awful to look at.

Hugo stood up. He stood up, put on his glasses, grabbed a hair tie, and walked out the door.

Hugo was going to find his roommate.

Whatever happened after he actually *found him*, Hugo wasn't sure. Either way, it would sure as hell be better than this feeling. By a million and a half miles, it had to be better. Hugo would make it better.

Or, Varian would be impossible to deal with, like usual, and nothing would change for them. But Hugo wasn't going to wait.

Hugo was so very good at waiting. He was also good at doing what he shouldn't, especially to preserve something he wanted in his life.

Countless times by now, Hugo had walked the halls of his school after dark. Mostly for the sake of thefts, or his own determination to have a midnight snack. In those instances, he always knew where he was going, and how to get there.

That sense of direction escaped him now.

Hugo wasn't sure how long he'd been searching, time-wise (although he seemed to be acutely aware of every minute that passed). What he did know was that by the time he had a decent idea of where to go, he had considered going back to the dorm and bailing on this whole thing at least five times.

Eventually the sound of clattering coming from the cooking class-ic classroom, led him to the right place.

The lights weren't on. The blond was almost impressed that his roommate had the good sense to keep them off. Helped to lessen the chances of getting caught in there without permission.

The door was already cracked, and made little to no noise when Hugo pushed it open further. He hovered in the doorway, staring in, finding Goggles with his back turned to him. Hugo took a

minute to watch him work.

Varian was entirely engrossed in the task at hand. He looked peaceful. Maybe it was just because of how warm the room was, and the smell of sizzling food (distinctly better smelling than some of the meals served by the school). Maybe it was because of how the few lights that were on (soft and shining off appliances that remained running overnight) reflected off Varian, off his blue eyes and freckles and focus.

Hugo wiped his hands of sweat.

Not one to waste time when it counts, Hugo knocked on the dark oak of the half-opened door, loud enough to make his presence known.

A less exhausted Varian might have jumped out of his skin at the sound. After all, it could have been a professor knocking, ready to dispense out a detention to this strange student out of their dorm in the AM hours, making a mess of school property. But, as we've established, Varian was quite tired. So, he simply turned to see who was there.

His initial bafflement, and scrunched up face, almost made Hugo relax. Then, for a flicker of a moment, Varian seemed happy to see him. To see HUGO. Then Hugo blinked and that expression crushed itself into one of neutrality and restraint.

"Hey," Varian spoke.

"Hey," Hugo said back.

Silence enveloped them both.

"Can I come in?" Hugo asked, still standing in the doorway.

Varian tilted his head. "Kind of a weird question. This isn't really *my* room or anything."

"Yeah," Hugo said, slowly insisting. "But, can I?"

Varian turned back to what he was cooking. "Yeah, you can," he said, devoid of strong emotion either way.

Hugo walked in and made himself comfortable, leaning against the counter near Varian. He watched his roommate fry eggs and sliced kielbasa in silence. All the while, thinking. *What happens now? Do I say something?*

In contrast, Varian couldn't have stopped himself from saying what he needed to say, even if he tried.

"How's the face doing?" Varian asked, remorse practically pouring out of him. He reached a hand up, as if to check, but snapping it back down to his side half way up. His eyes locked with the ground.

Hugo held himself a little straighter, looking down on Varian, his fury resurfacing.

Good. Hugo thought. *He should feel shitty about that. It was a shitty thing to do.*

Although, in the back of his mind, he felt a strange sense of solace at the question, at being asked if he was alright at all. That didn't happen often. Don certainly never asked. ~~No or did she ever feel guilty for putting him in harm's way.~~ For now, he elected to ignore his scattered thoughts.

"Not bad. I've had worse swings come my way." Hugo said this so casually.

Varian's eyes flew back up, now wide and worried. His terror shifted to a grim assumption.

Hugo backtracked. "Not— Relax. Mom had me learn self defense when I was younger. I've always been good at keeping myself out of trouble, but she thought it was for the best. And I agree."

Varian sighed, calming himself. His gaze flickered back down. "Your mom sounds kinda protective."

"Yeah, she is," Hugo stated, voice somewhere between fondness and fear and fact.

Varian's expression soured slightly. Hugo winced. *Shit. Right. Moms.*

The silence returned.

Talk to him. Hugo thought. *Ask about what he said about his mom.* "What are you making?" *Coward.*

"Late night breakfast."

"Early morning," Hugo corrected.

Varian exhaled softly; the ghost of a laugh. Still, the silence stuck.

The conversation felt so stiff it could have been mistaken for stone.

As his roommate cooked, Hugo pushed himself off the counter, exploring the classroom. "Please tell me this place has a coffee maker."

Varian huffed. "Fuck, I hope so. I didn't bother looking," he glanced around, squinting. "I didn't bother with the lights either. Slipped my mind. You can turn them on if you want."

Hugo halted. A realization hit him. He groaned. "Oh, you are *not* good at this."

"Good at what?"

"At *not* getting caught sneaking out," Hugo walked past him. "Keep the lights off unless you want us to get in trouble."

"Oh," Varian said, shaking his head. "Right."

As Varian watched Hugo search, he remembered his suspicions about the blond's behaviors. His thief-like behaviors.

Then, Hugo turned his face, and a guilt-ridden twist in Varian's gut kept him from voicing these thoughts. Besides, this was not the time, nor the place.

There was, in fact, no coffee maker. So, Hugo resigned himself to his own exhaustion, coffee-less. He *could* just go back to his and his roommate's dorm and get coffee there, from their own machine. But he couldn't quite bring his feet to move from his spot by Varian. At the same time, he couldn't bring himself to speak of the obvious elephant in the room.

Their fight.

Despite Hugo's early determination to fix this rift, to not leave their dynamic in the sorry state it was currently in, his courage ran out the door whenever he looked at Varian.

Varian was feeling a similar way.

It was tempting to stay in this silence. No fighting, but no making up either. It was a strange kind of truce, like floating in space. Directionless.

But they weren't in space. They had to deal with gravity of a few kinds.

"Are we going to talk about what happened upstairs?" Varian asked, abruptly, unable to stand it any longer.

Despite relief filling his chest, like a hot air balloon, Hugo was too stunned to speak.

Varian waited for an answer. When none came, he grew frustrated and considered dropping the subject entirely. Then his eyes, as if all on their own, locked with Hugo's luminous green ones, the stove light reflecting off his glasses, and Varian shattered like glass.

"I'm sorry I punched you."

Varian was. Is. Sorry.

"You said that earlier," Hugo said, like the words were bursting from him. "And for the record, that was not a punch. If you'd *meant* to punch me, I'd hope your technique would've been better," he scoffed, ignoring his roommate, ready to distract from the heaviness of the conversation at all costs. "I mean, my biggest worry right now is for your Hero Training grades. If that's the best you can do —"

"Hugo," Varian said, curtly.

Hugo stopped talking. *Coward*. He thought again. He really did not want to have this conversation. And yet he did. And yet he didn't. And yet.

"I—" Varian stuttered, nervous too. He continued. "I know that you understand it was an accident. But that doesn't make it right. I'm sorry."

"I know you are," Hugo said, simply.

"I mean it," Varian said. "I'm so sorry."

Hugo let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding. "I believe you." And he did, to his own surprise.

Varian nodded. "I think you deserve an explanation on why it happened at all. I think I owe you that."

Hugo's first reaction was to deny the existence of any obligation, for there was none. Hugo should know that better than most.

But he wanted answers. Best thing to do to get those answers would be to say nothing. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, right?

"You don't owe me anything," Hugo said, surprising himself yet again. *Why did I say that?* He thought.

Varian's brow furrowed. He nodded again. "Then how about I tell you because I..." he trailed off, half frowning, half something else, something softer. "I want to talk to someone about it?"

"Even if that someone is me?" Hugo asked, solemn.

Varian paused. *Even if it's Hugo?* He really had to consider that. He looked at Hugo. His roommate. His rival. The bane of his existence. And?

If there was one thing Varian was *not*, it was an idiot. He understood that this feeling was not some adrenaline or stress created blip in his brain. It had been sitting there, patient and waiting to make itself known for some time. The worst part was knowing it was there.

Deep down; Super deep down; Like, so deep down that he felt like he was looking down a bottomless pit when he thought about it... Varian wanted Hugo to be his friend.

Varian had never really had anyone like Hugo around. Someone his age, scientifically minded, and passionate about that subject. Rapunzel and the rest of his long-time friends were great, but not nearly as into alchemy as he was. And that was fine! He wouldn't trade them for the world. Still, it was nice to have someone to talk to about the stuff. But Varian knew that was a cop-out. That wasn't what drew him to Hugo. Varian had other science-y friends, like Nuru and Yong, and they were definitely more pleasant to be around than his roommate.

No. More than that drew Varian to Hugo as a potential friend.

Hugo was the worst. He was smug, and snarky, and infuriating, and never backed down from a debate. He was just as scrappy and determined to be the best as Varian was. Hugo was weird. Hugo was Hugo.

Maybe time had been wearing Varian down, but outside of the topic of Legacy Day, Hugo was someone he liked talking to, even when they were doing their rival-scientist/magician/chemist-thing. No one pushed him like his roommate did. He felt more driven, more motivated, when he was around Hugo. It was a nice change of pace from his usual motive: fear of his destiny and the ticking clock threatening to take his passions away from him.

Without ever meaning to, being around Hugo made Varian feel like he was fully being himself. And everyday, it seemed like there was less and less bite in Varian's words when he talked to Hugo.

Varian wanted to be friends with Hugo.

You have got to be fucking kidding me. Varian thought.

Curses, it felt like such a small thing. What was the big deal? So what if he wanted a new friend? Varian wasn't as social as Rapunzel, nor was he as standoff-ish as Cassandra. He especially wasn't as tight-knit with others like Eugene and Lance tended to be. He really couldn't just walk right up to people and shake their hand like Nuru or Yong did.

But when he liked someone, he would make the effort to befriend them, happily.

So, here Varian was; Varian wanted to be friends with Hugo. Hugo, who was so awfully *Hugo*.

Varian looked at him. His roommate. His rival. And... *and?*

Varian nodded. "Yeah, even if it's you."

Hugo stared back at him, trying to decipher the mental war he'd just seen play out on Varian's face. But, that final look was squarely decisive. Hugo decided to believe that was true, (well, true enough. Let's not get optimistic here), so he stayed quiet and listened.

Varian braced himself.

"I've been thinking about this for a while already. All that talk about accepting destiny and how 'everyone' does eventually, just brought it to the surface." Varian took slow, calculated breaths. He held one of his arms around his own stomach.

"My mom left years ago and never came back." Varian curled in on himself more, pressure building behind his eyes. "Dorothy isn't supposed to leave home, let alone for the sake of science, which is what she did. So, everyone told me her disappearance was *because* she broke from destiny."

"I wonder if that will be me one day." Tears returned to his cheek. "I'll reach my limit and just leave, never to be heard from again. Instead of everyone going poof, it'll just be me."

Hugo's mouth went dry. *That can't happen. Can it?* No words followed; they clogged his throat. He hoped the shorter student could see unalloyed understanding in him, despite being unable to voice it.

Varian wiped away his tears. He tried to smile. It barely reached his eyes. "It's fine. I've lived with that idea for a long time. I know how to cope with it. I just thought—" Varian said, the attempt at a brave face leaving him as he continued to speak. "At least before I sign, I don't have that knife at my back. I'm just me. Just Varian."

It was a simple feeling, but as vast and heavy as the sky. Varian lived with it all the time.

Hugo saw through it.

"An alchemist," Hugo finished the sentence.

"What?" Varian blinked.

"Varian, you're an alchemist. That's what you are," Hugo said. "And for the record, you aren't *just* anything."

Varian seemed like he was going to start crying again. Hugo was about to backtrack, but then Varian smiled for real.

“Thanks,” Varian said, meaning it.

Hugo crossed his arms. His hands found the fabric of his sleeves, and fiddled with them. “No problem.”

The silence enveloped them once again, but now it felt ever so slightly more amicable. In that space, Hugo spoke. “This does explain a few things you’ve said in the past.”

Varian smirked, subtly. “Have you been trying to solve the puzzle that is Varian? Many have tried.”

Hugo huffed. “Yeah, keep dreaming, Goggles.” Then he stopped. “Wait. Please don’t tell me the freak out our first night together, over your goggles, was *also* connected to your mom?”

Varian tapped said goggles on his head. “Along with my destiny, I also got my goggles from my mom.”

Hugo groaned. “Oh my god this really *does* explain a lot.”

Varian chuckled cathartically.

Speaking of explaining past comments, the dark haired student’s mind began to recall its own moments of intrigue with Hugo. Most apparent of which (having nothing to do with his Hugo-is-a-thief suspicions) was when they were in the tunnel together: “*You may not have asked for your destiny, but I did!*”

If he had to guess, Varian was pretty sure he could deduce that statement’s meaning. But as long as they were sharing, it couldn’t hurt to ask. “Can I ask you a question?”

Hugo raised an eyebrow, gesturing for him to continue.

“Are you adopted?”

Hugo froze. Despite the poker face, his terror was clear.

“What?” Varian asked, quiet and concerned. “What’s wrong?”

“You know what you just asked me, right?” Hugo said, coldly.

Varian shrugged, growing confused. “Yeah? Why?”

Hugo remained serious. He could practically hear Don’s voice telling him to stop now. Leave. Don’t give personal details like that.

That voice went unheeded, against his better judgment.

“And what if I am?” Hugo asked, mentally coiled like a spring.

Varian stared at him, thoroughly unimpressed. “Hugo, everyone on my dad’s side was adopted into their family. If that’s your sob story, you’ll have to do better.”

Hugo’s expression went completely slack. He looked around, as though thinking: *Is this guy for real?* “You know, this is kinda a big deal for me to be admitting this to you.”

Varian frowned. “Why?”

“How many students with destinies do you know who were adopted? Offered a cushy fate they never thought they’d have,” Hugo said, feverishly incredulous. Laughing joylessly. “Not many, that’s for sure.”

“I mean, yeah,” Varian admitted, still undeterred. “You may not have gotten your fate like everyone else, but you’re still your mom’s son. Why would being adopted change anything?” Varian asked, guileless and true. “Magic will know the truth. Simple as that.”

Hugo could feel his own heart beat like a jackhammer. In his head, he had always known that logic to be true. But, to hear it out loud, and without the biting tones of Don, or the seemingly disinterested mumblings of Cyrus, the only others before now who knew and believed as he did that no problem would arise... was incredible.

Hugo felt ruddy. He felt seen. Almost instinctively, he considered spelling out his whole life story for his roommate right there and then. His orphanhood, his fight to survive on his own, his adoption (the only part Varian knew for now), his constant thieving for Don, his justified desperation for the security of destiny; everything.

Something stopped him. There, staring at Varian and his stupid big blue eyes and too many freckles and honest-to-goodness words, something still held Hugo back.

Call it common sense, for now.

“Wow, okay, I needed to hear that,” Hugo allowed himself to admit. His eyes felt like they were burning. He wiped them quickly, tears unshed.

Varian stared at him in surprise. He never expected his words to get a reaction like *that*. “Who made you think otherwise?” He had to ask.

Hugo’s voice switched to a deadpan tone. “Take a guess.”

“Grimm?”

“Grimm.”

Varian glared at nothing. “What a fucking ass.”

“Tell me about it,” Hugo breathed out.

Varian’s glare broke. He giggled, staring at the ground. “And here I was thinking your big secret was that you were a thief or something.”

Hugo froze again, ever so subtly. It faded in a second.

“Look at us,” Hugo’s laughter was genuine. “Couple of loser scientists with chips on their shoulders.”

“I’m more of an alchemist,” Varian corrected.

“And I’m a mechanic. Take the compliment.”

“That’s a compliment?”

“You’re insufferable.”

“Now *that’s* a compliment.”

Varian shook his head, a thought hitting him suddenly. “Sorry for kinda, forcing that out of you, I just didn’t think it was some grand reveal or anything. If this stuff is a big deal to you—”

“No, no,” Hugo started. Then, he winced. “I mean, it is, but I don’t see you as the type to make it a big deal. You’re not that guy.”

The dark haired student pretended to sneer. “Is that right?”

“Yeah,” the blond said, smirking. “Why? Itching to prove me wrong?”

“Could you blame me?” Varian said, all in jest. “It’s such fun in class.”

“Rarity does make things more enjoyable.”

The two of them laugh. As they settled down, some lingering gravity remained. Naturally, they dealt with it in their own way.

“So, mechanics, huh?” Varian asked, eyebrow raised, a smile on his face. He’d heard Hugo mention it before, such as when he explained the invention of Olivia, but he’d never heard Hugo call himself a mechanic. He said it like how Varian said he was an alchemist. Rickety and hopeful.

“More of a hobby than a study, obviously,” Hugo noted. “Magic is the priority for the future sorcerer’s apprentice, after all. If I had the time I’d indulge it, but hey, that’s life.”

Varian hummed, mind turned back to another topic.

“So you just,” Varian started. “Didn’t talk to anyone about this? No one?”

“About what? Mechanics?”

Varian huffed. “No, sorry, about being adopted.

Hugo shrugged. “Nope. Other than to my mom,” he said, shoulders tensing.

Varian did notice *that*. He opted to change the subject.

“Well, I don’t have that luxury,” Varian joked. “My mom’s not a good listener these days.”

Hugo coughed in shock. “Fuck man, isn’t that a little heavy to joke about?”

“It’s my consolation prize for having a dead mom. My sense of humor.”

Before he could stop himself, Hugo snorted laughing way too loudly. He slapped a hand over his mouth a little too late. He dared to glance at Varian, finding his roommate wearing an adorable, shit-eating grin. Rather than annoyance, it made Hugo feel lighter than air. It was weird, but nice.

Hugo tried to brush it off with another quip. “That should be on a tee-shirt.”

“You think if I asked Rapunzel she’d make me one in her Fashion Design class?” Varian shot back.

“Why bother? You can make one with alchemy instead!” Hugo joked. Then he started thinking out loud. “Maybe use that magic thread of yours. Although, that kind of jump in application could take a few years to perfect.” It was an interesting idea.

Silence followed.

Hugo turned back to the shorter student, hoping he was going to look outraged or scrunched up in thought or both.

Instead, he found Varian retreating to his melancholy.

Ah. Not much alchemy in his future.

“Sorry,” Hugo muttered.

Varian remained silent.

The food was done cooking. Varian shut off the burner. Then, he took the pan and slid to the floor with it in hand. He was tired of standing, and tired in general.

Hugo sighed, kneeling to sit beside him.

Just before the silence threatened to turn on them again, Hugo nudged Varian lightly with his shoulder.

“Sorry for just now,” Hugo started.

Varian looked at him, understanding.

He considered stopping there. It probably would’ve been easy.

“I’m sorry for saying all that stuff about ‘accepting’ what we’re given, too. Back in the dorm, I mean. Of all people, I shouldn’t have said that,” Hugo’s hands found his sleeves again. Nervous or not, he became more and more confident in his words as he spoke. “We all have our reasons, Royals or Rebels. I found mine long before I got my fate handed to me. Yours is no different.”

All at once, Varian wanted to ask what that reason was. He felt greedy. Greedy to want to know Hugo. Still, the expression the blond wore suggested that such details were not his to hear just yet.

“Thank you,” Varian murmured.

Hugo responded with silence. His early urge to tell-all had fled. At least for now.

Varian graced him with a crooked half-smile. It remained on his face as he spoke, his quiet tone in heartbreaking contrast with the jovial one he had worn earlier. “Legacy Day is practically here. Hugo, you have your whole life to be good at magic, and science, and everything in between. You will get there. I can believe in you and your stupid single-mindedness in getting the life you want. The life you’re destined for. But all I get is now. Once I sign—”

“I thought you weren’t gonna sign?” Hugo interrupted, unsure whether the motive behind his words was hope or dread.

For a long while Varian said nothing.

“I don’t want to risk everyone,” Varian said at last. It was all that could be said.

Hugo’s mind twisted itself into silence. He was wholly stuck on what to say.

Perhaps it was for the best. Sometimes, sitting in silence is enough. For at last, the silence was comfortable. The world and its harshness was too big to overcome in a single night. Or, a single very early morning.

“Do you want any?” Varian offered him the pan.

After that, the roommates sat on the floor, picking at their strange little breakfast right out of the cast-iron pan it was cooked in. Peace surrounded and blanketed them, if only in this place. But the world is more than a kitchen.

“We should get back to our dorm,” Varian said eventually, cracking his knuckles. “Salvage what we can of the project.”

“What’s there to salvage?” Hugo asked, still chewing on his last bite. “Sometimes you gotta accept crushing defeat,” he swallowed.

Varian grimaced. “I wouldn’t call it *crushing* defeat.”

“Do you prefer monumental?” Hugo asked. “How about incredible?”

Varian rolled his eyes. “Okay, okay.”

“Oh, what about gigantic? Unbelievable? Astonishing? Staggering?”

Varian started to laugh. “Okay, I get it.”

“No, wait, how about amazeballs?”

Now Varian was really laughing. “Amazeballs defeat? That’s the worst one yet.”

Hugo nodded. “Agreed. Let’s stick with staggering.”

Varian feigned seriousness, poorly hiding his amusement.

Mindlessly, he grabbed the handle of the pan and stood to clean it off. He brought it to the sink. A thought stopped him, as he examined at the object in his grasp with an odd intensity. It’s round shape, it’s durability. Like an alchemy ball. Like a...

Could that work?

There’s no feeling quite like getting an idea, especially when said idea completely and utterly fixes a seemingly impossible problem. At that exact second, Varian experienced that joy.

“Oh my god,” Varian said, thoughts accelerating rapidly, in the best possible way. His mind filtered through all the chemicals he still had in his dorm.

It might be enough. It might work!

“Oh my god!” Varian said, waving his arms around in pure scientific-joy.

Hugo, stared at him, bewildered. Before Hugo could say anything, Varian ran up to him.

“Hugo,” Varian said, almost sing-songily. “Hugo.”

“Yeah?” Hugo asked, almost wary, the beginnings of a smile in his voice.

Varian beamed madly. “I have an idea to save our project, and it involves just as much alchemy as it involves mechanics. Think you’re up for that?”

Hugo didn’t bother hiding his own cheshire grin. “How much metal do we need?”

Varian raised an eyebrow. “How much do you have?”

That was the night Varian learned that Hugo had a sizable stash of metals under his bed alongside his other supplies.

Needless to say, the coffee machine remained in use all that very early morning. Together, they focused their efforts on the parts that they felt most passionate about. Varian went from chemical compound to chemical compound, making sure his measurements were as exact as possible (so that it didn’t blow up in their faces when tested). Hugo used a blowtorch. A freaking blow torch. He was in paradise. Despite the lateness, and general frantic nature of the work, it was kinda fun. Who would’ve thought that actually working together would lead to success? NOT THEM! THAT’S WHO!

When they finally finished, neither of them wanted to check the clock to see how many hours of sleep they were about to collect (the number was very small). Nor, in all honesty, could they even open their eyes wide enough to do so.

“We should test this,” Varian said, trying to fight against his drooping eyelids.

"Eh," Hugo said, sluggishly. "We're the best at this. I'm sure it's fine."

“Mhm. The best of the best,” is all Varian said.

Both were too tired to do anything but collapse.

The sun rose on a new day.

As did the roommates’ pets.

While Olivia sat in her charging station, soaking up the sunlight, Ruddiger sat himself in front of Varian. No alarm was set to wake his friend up that morning. Instead, a fuzzy paw at his nose did the trick.

After a few (dozen) tries.

Varian struggled in vain to fully wake up, sleepiness clinging to him like never before. Ruddiger patted his nose again. Varian nearly sneezed. His eyes opened just enough to see the raccoon before him.

Yay. My backup alarm. “Hi bud,” he said, groggily. Ruddiger chirped happily. Shooing him away, lazily, Varian let fall back down to his armrest.

Wait. Armrest? Through half-open eyes, Varian saw that he’d slept in his desk chair all night (err, all morning).

He also noted then that said chair was pushed from its usual spot to right next to Hugo’s, as close as they could possibly end up. From the very close sound of soft snores, Varian could only assume Hugo was asleep in his chair as well.

Varian’s head fell back against the spot it had slept in, resting on (what he assumed was) the round edge of his chair. It shifted against him.

Wait. Wait. It shifted? Varian finally managed to blink his eyes open to find that he was not, in fact, sleeping against the chair itself. Nope. He was sleeping with his head on Hugo’s shoulder. Strangely, that realization didn’t send Varian running. In fact, it made him sleepier (Hugo’s shoulder was surprisingly comfy).

Then, he noticed how bright it was outside.

Then, he noticed the time.

“Shit!” Varian bolted out of the chair, wide awake.

Hugo jolted awake as well, glasses still ajar on his face, clearly confused.

Frantic, Varian shoved his phone in the blond’s face. He saw the time on it.

“Shit!” Hugo jumped from his chair, sending it falling to the ground.

Gathering their finished project into the duffle bag Hugo had offered to carry it in, they were out the door.

The roommates sprinted down the halls towards their first class of the day, Science and Sorcery.

The class they were currently SUPER LATE FOR.

Half expecting the door to be locked (as Professor Rumpelstiltskin was notorious for not letting late students inside), the pair practically shoved their way through the door. It was not, in fact, locked, so they both ended up stumbling into the classroom.

Professor Rumpelstiltskin facing the front of the class, to best view the presentations. Annoyed by the distribution, he stared at them with a frigid expression. The students who had just finished presenting were returning to their seats, eager to avoid the wrath.

Varian and Hugo stood there, still catching their breaths, awaiting judgment.

Miraculously, the professor’s icy demeanor thawed just enough to save them. He harrumphed. “This had better be good.”

The roommates scurried to the front of the room.

Hugo plopped the bag over his shoulder onto the front desk, muttering curse words as he collected himself.

Varian's brain picked that exact moment to realize that they were both still in their day-clothes from yesterday. He hoped no one would notice. He moved to straighten his farm's bandana, only to find it gone, remembering he'd taken it off last night and forgotten it. He looked a little less like a farmer today. The day of, possibly, his last opportunity to be an alchemist before signing.

Then, Varian made eye contact with Hugo. Another realization hit him. They never decided who would do the talking.

Hugo opened his mouth to say something. But, he stopped, thinking to himself. He looked at Varian. His thoughtful expression was quickly covered with one of smugness.

"Well?" Hugo whispered. "Start talking, Goggles."

If a human being could glow, without the use of magic, Varian would have done so then and there. He faced the rest of the class.

"Greetings everyone! As you all know, for this project our goal was to create a substance, chemical compound, or device which could transform objects into the three states of matter: solid, liquid, and gas, thrice over, and make it vanish. The task was difficult."

Varian glanced at Hugo.

Difficult was putting it lightly, they basically thought simultaneously.

"However," Varian added some showmanship to his voice. "I think you will find our results nothing short of exemplary."

Varian stood aside as Hugo stepped forward, holding the device they settled on creating: a staff.

Most of the staff was made of pinchback metal. Gold-like in appearance, though much more stable, and far more useful. Top of the staff held a circular ring, with three glowing orbs lined up in a row at the top. Inside the ring was another glowing orb, this one being the largest, glowing a turquoise-lime green. Height wise, the staff stood just a few centimeters taller than Varian himself, and a few more shorter than Hugo.

"This baby isn't your average magical conduit," Varian said. On cue, Hugo pressed a button on the staff's main body. Said button moved the three orbs around, showing the different orders they could be placed in on top. Varian grinned at the small success. He continued speaking. "Using these chemical orbs around the ring, and the internal mechanics that allow for them to be closer to one or another at the press of a button, this staff can be used to conjure a number of complicated magical compounds in real-time."

Hugo chuckled, interjecting. "And, the types of metals used are meant to keep the stability at optimal level," he rattled off the many different types he used to actually form the staff and its shape (deciding not to mention that most of it was scrap metal he'd been collecting).

Varian nodded along with him, amused at his enthusiasm.

The professor hemmed and hawed, growing mildly interested. “But does it work?” He then levitated an empty cup in front of them. “Please demonstrate.”

Hugo spun the staff in his hands, like he was totally sure this would work out (he wasn’t).

With a wave of the staff’s head, the cup turned to liquid.

In the next move, the liquified cup turned to steam.

Finally, Hugo used the staff to turn the cup back to its original state as a solid, before doing it all again two more times, rapid fire, the cup perfectly intact by the end.

It worked . Varian thought. *It really worked. I could cry!*

Their classmates, sights glued to the demonstration, became distracted discussing what they’d just seen from the teamwork of the two best students. Some shouted questions to them, others talked amongst themselves, but all were impressed.

Hugo, still sporting a smug expression, observed that Varian was doing nothing to hide the immense, relieved merriment on his face. He was basking it all in. Hugo hovered next to him.

“Weren’t having any doubts, were you?” Hugo teased.

To his surprise, Varian smirked, undeterred. Without a word, he took the staff from Hugo’s grasp. He aimed for the cup once more, before using the staff to encase the cup in a stick compound.

“If any of you remember the blue pets incident, you’ll know why I added that feature,” Varian joked to the class. Agreeable laughter echoed back.

As the class once again got distracted, Varian leaned close to Hugo. “Doubts? When it comes to alchemy? Never, Glasses.”

Hugo’s face felt warm as he smiled.

We’re losing a damn good alchemist. The thought came sudden and unwelcome. Hugo’s mouth twitched down, ever so slightly.

The professor coughed, hackingly loud, and everyone quieted down. He reminded the pair to please dispose of the cup as required. Varian turned it to steam once more, sending it along with the sticky compound invisibly into empty air.

In the aftermath, the professor scribbled onto his grading sheet. The project partners silently held their breath. Anticipation weighed over them both.

“Well,” Professor Rumpelstiltskin grumbled, pausing for a long beat. “You passed—”

The professor didn’t get another word in, because Varian and Hugo celebrated almost immediately, and simultaneously.

“Oh thank fuck,” Hugo said, loudly. “Hell yeah!” Varian yelled.

Neither of them even heard what their grade was (it was an A) in their excitement, before the professor lost his patience and yelled for them to get to their seats “before I start handing out

detentions for being late.”

Varian and Hugo hurried to their seats, a skip in their steps. They sat beside each other, as per usual.

As they watched the rest of the presentations filter by, Hugo felt Varian nudged him.

“This doesn’t change anything, you know,” Varian said, smiling. “I can still kick your ass at this stuff any day of the week, your Highness”

But something *had* changed. For the first time, Varian could not fully hate Hugo. Maybe he never could. At least now he could admit that.

For the first time, Hugo saw just how bright Varian could shine. Not simply in academic ability or alchemical genius, but as a person; a person Hugo felt okay being around. Maybe more than okay.

Both knew they would still fight, and still try to keep things as they were. But now they were rivals with a bit less malice. Or, as someone less deranged would say, they were friends.

Hugo smiled back. “Of course,” he sounded utterly gleeful. “Who am I to demean your delusions, Farmboy.”

The rest of class went by uneventfully, as did the rest of their science and magic based classes. If anyone noticed a slightly more cheerful tone to Varian and Hugo’s daily debates and squabbles, they did not say so to the duo’s faces.

Maybe it was their lack-of-sleep causing that change in behavior, anyhow. That day, Varian and Hugo slept through lunch, their exhaustion finally hitting them all at once. They also sat at the same table. They did that without even thinking about it.

“Should we wake them?” Rapunzel asked, concerned. Eugene, hand in hand with her and similarly worried, staring down at the pair. The rest of the friend group pondered the same question.

At last, Nuru shook her head. “Let them rest, they’ll probably need it,” she led the onlookers away, leaving the roommates alone to sleep.

“How mad do you think they’ll be when they wake up at the same table?” Lance questioned. He doubted they sat together intentionally.

Cassandra hissed. “Nuclear.”

Yong ran ahead. “Who knows? Maybe today’s the day they become friends!”

The rest of the group laughed.

Dramatic irony? At Ever After High? It’s more likely than you think.

AAAAAAAAAA Basically 85,000 words in, and we are finally past the enemies/rivalry stage and into the friendship/rivalry stage :D

As a treat for your patience, I will let you know here and now what the next chapter is titled: "The Day Before Legacy Day". After that, I think you can guess what's coming up :)

Kudos and comments are always welcome! Remember to talk to the people who care about you, maybe take up journaling (if you want), and DRINK SOME WATER!!!!

The Day Before Legacy Day

Chapter Summary

One day more.

Chapter Notes

THANK Y'ALL FOR 5000+ HITS!! And thank you for your patience. I really enjoyed writing this one. Hope y'all enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The day before Legacy Day.

A day of business.

All classes were canceled. Although the ceremony would be on a Saturday, many of the students' parents, including highly important (to Grimm) royalty state figures, preferred to arrive a day early and help their students with the necessary preparations.

For some, this was a joyous day. One last sleep before the best moment of their lives. For others, it was less joyous. The reasons varied, but the dread was almost identical. Still, for most of them, as said above, it was a day of business.

Not tomfoolery, no lollygagging, and certainly no distractions from the task at hand.

But where would we be without those things? Somewhere boring, that's where.

Speaking of distractions, the roommates! The rivals! The friends?

Well...

Rome wasn't built in a day.

The shaky grounds on which a friendship could be built between the infamous roommates Varian and Hugo was very unstable.

Both had laid part of their hearts to the other. That was not a simple thing. Everything is easier said in the dark (or in a dimly lit kitchen at an unhealthy hour of the night). There was still so much they didn't know about each other.

Only time would tell if this peace would stick.

When Hugo returned to his dorm after a long and quiet breakfast, alone, and spotted his roommate pacing and muttering, he was not particularly compelled to be concerned.

“Do I wanna know?” Hugo asked himself, quietly. He glanced over at Olivia. She tilted her head to the side, acting confused like he was, before climbing off his shoulder, to join Ruddiger on the floor.

Hugo then noticed Varian’s phone sitting in what looked to be a mug of dark coffee on his desk. *Is he really so out of it today that he let this happen?* He thought, almost laughing.

Hugo went to free the device.

“Gah,” Varian rushed over. “Don’t touch that.”

“Right,” Hugo said, sarcastic. “Because mirror phone’s go great with a morning cup of joe.”

“It’s not coffee. It’s a non-water based drying solution,” Varian crossed his arms, glowing with pride. “Made it myself, and I can attest to its absolute effectiveness.”

Hugo did not look impressed.

Varian explained further. “My phone got knocked into Ruddigier’s water bowl. I’m trying to see if I can save it. I really can’t afford to buy a new one.”

Satisfied, or at least bored, Hugo backed off.

Varian checked the substance again, seeing his mirror phone was still not functional.

I could call Dad and ask for help. Varian shook the thought away immediately. He could predict how that conversation would go.

“First time he calls home the whole semester, and it’s to ask for money? After breaking his phone?!”

Yeah, thanks but no thanks. Varian would prefer to avoid that headache, thank you very much.

Ah well. If it really is broken, it's not like I could start calling him anyway.

A part of Varian did feel guilty for going no contact. He did miss his family, after all. But, he knew what their talking points would be if he did call. They were always the same – Destiny this, future that.

Varian shivered thinking about what they’d say if they ever found out about all the Royal vs Rebellion happening at the school. He knew it was only thanks to the bare amount of respect he knew his family had for his choices that they didn’t call him either. Still, keeping that kind of thing from them would be difficult. At least he had one more day before their arrival to figure out how to do that.

Here, all Varian had to deal with was Headmaster Grimm’s pompous self, his grades, and his roommate. He’d take the devil he was beginning to know over the devil he knew too well any day of the week.

Speak of the devil, Hugo cleared his throat.

“I wish you luck with your coffee.”

“Drying solution.”

“Tomato tomato,” Hugo slung his bag over his shoulder. “I’ll be at the library dealing with you-know-what.”

Ah yes. Varian knew what he meant by that.

“Is your mother coming today?” Varian asked. It wasn’t often that he got the chance to come face to face with famous sorcerers. Well, he’d never had the opportunity, but that’s besides the point. He’d love to hear from her expertise on a few topics. A few dozen. Not for the first time, Varian felt a twinge of jealousy that Hugo got to learn from someone as magically important as the Sorcerer.

“Nope,” Hugo said. “She doesn’t need to. I can handle these things on my own. Besides, I’ve got Olivia, and she’s the perfect errands partner.”

Then, Olivia, scampering to Hugo, got caught up in her raccoon friend’s tail, sufficiently freaking him out enough that he took off running around the room. In response, Olivia did the sensible thing of chasing him for fun.

“Olivia!” Hugo tried to calm her down (if only he could catch her; he refused to use magic on her). “A little help here, Goggles? At least control your trash panda?”

As if on cue, Varian’s phone buzzed. He grinned like a cheshire. “It worked!” .

“I have to do everything around here,” Hugo mumbled, before setting to work stopping Olivia (and Ruddiger) down before they broke something.

Meanwhile, Varian lifted the device out of the drying solution, relieved to see the screen flash to life.

Relief was replaced with regret the next second, as the caller ID popped up.

“Dad?” Varian asked aloud. His first instinct was to throw the phone back in the solution and ignore it. But... he really did miss him. Him and the whole family. That part Varian took over. Against his better judgment, he tapped the screen to accept.

Quirin’s face filled the screen.

“Son!” He exclaimed. “I was beginning to think you weren’t going to answer.”

Varian put on his best face. “Hi Dad. Hi. Yeah, sorry, it’s been a busy morning. How have things been?”

His dad moved the camera around, showing Aunt Adira more clearly as she drove, along with Uncle Hector, in the back seat, holding a knife. None of this on its own phased Varian. “As good as they can be. Crops are coming in alright, right in time for the town market to reopen.”

Must be where they’re heading now. Varian remembered the many early mornings he’d been dragged out of bed to help pack the car for the market run. Getting up and getting there was always a pain, but once he was there, he’d usually be able to try sneaking off. It was the best place around

to find supplies for his science experiments (it was no Book End though). If his dad wasn't there, Adira and Hector would turn a blind eye.

"We've finally got that one rotten tree out of the ground," Quirin continued. "We were debating what we're going to replace it with."

"Giant sequoia," Hector's voice from the back seat shouted.

Closer to the phone, Adira could be heard groaning. "He's been demanding that for days," she yelled back at him. "It's not gonna happen, little brother. We're going with my pick: birch. It'll look cooler."

Varian's forced smile morphed into something more genuine. A tinge of homesickness struck his heart.

Quirin smiled back. "My vote has been for a maple tree, so we're split in a three way tie at the moment. Care to be the tie breaker?"

"Varian, have I ever told you you're my favorite nephew?" Adira said, dead serious.

"Don't listen to her," Hector barked out. "Remember who didn't rat you out when you bought all that liquid nitrogen?"

Quirin's volume rose. "You what?"

Varian chuckled nervously. "Anywho, my vote's for a maple tree. Might be able to get syrup out of it."

"Knew he was going to say that."

"Who even likes syrup?"

Varian and his dad both laughed at their family members' grumblings.

"Anywho," Varian sat down at his desk. "What're you calling for?"

"To check in," Quirin said. "We're on route. Should be at your school in twenty, maybe twenty five minutes."

Varian short circuited. "Uh. Where exactly?"

Quirin stared at him with cold understanding. "Your school."

Varian blew a fuse.

"I'm-I'm sorry, what?! You said you weren't coming till the day *of* Legacy Day? Why are you—"

"I always planned for us to come the day before. I told you as such. I even reminded you this morning. Didn't you see my messages?"

"Well..." He side-eyed Ruddiger; the raccoon remained unperturbed by the scrutiny, as he was too busy running around like the wild animal he was.

Quirin recognized that tone. “What did you do now?”

Varian wilted. His father sighed.

“Just be ready when we get there, son,” Quirin said. “We’ll meet you in front of the school. We have a long day ahead of us. I know you haven’t done your prep for the ceremony.”

“You don’t know that,” Varian muttered.

As if he was physically in the room and looking down on him, Quirin stared at him through the screen.

Varian threatened to collapse in on himself like a deck of cards.

Meanwhile, Hugo gave up trying to wrestle Olivia from Ruddiger’s tail (which she grabbed about a minute earlier and refused to let go of). Hugo, preferring not to get scratched today, stood.

“Fine, be that way. I’ll do my errands on my own.” the blond said, bitter, dusting himself off.

As he passed his roommate, Hugo gave him a casual salute.

An idea struck Varian.

“Yeah, yeah. I’d love to meet up, really I would, but,” he grabbed Hugo’s arm. The blond made a small yelp of surprise, as he was pulled into the frame of the call. “My roommate, Hugo, here, his mom isn’t coming to help him with his pre-Legacy Day errands. Isn’t that a shame? So I offered to go with him and help out.”

“Excuse me?” Hugo’s words were not heard over the protests of Varian’s relatives.

“What?!” Next to Quirin, Adira’s voice echoed. “Told you he would bail.” Heard from the back seat, Hector was cackling loud enough to reach the speakers. Quirin shook his head. “Why don’t we join you both—”

“Hmm?” Varian feigned confusion. “I can’t hear you, I think the connection is breaking up. So sorry anyway, bye!”

“Son—” was all Varian gave his Dad time to say before he ended the call. He then tossed the phone onto his bed like it was on fire.

You know, the logical action a person would take.

As his adrenaline and panic felt back to normal levels. Varian leaned towards his roommate, who was still standing there, stunned.

“Hugo.”

Hugo turned heel.

“Nope,” he said, walking out the door.

Varian ran after him. “Hugo.”

“Not happening.”

“Glasses.”

“Nuh uh.”

“Your highness,” Varian yelled.

“I’m not your get-out-of-jail-free card Goggles,” Hugo said, stopping. “I have things to do.”

“So do I!” Varian asserted, arms outstretched. “Believe me, I’d rather not be stuck with you all day, *again*. I think we’ve both had enough of that for now.”

Hugo felt compelled to agree.

“But,” Varian held his head high. “I think you owe me. After all, it was *me* who saved our asses with that Science and Sorcery project.”

Well now, that pissed Hugo off. “Um, as I recall, it was my mechanics that actually built the staff.”

“And my idea to build it in the first place,” Varian attempted to saunter past his roommate, still standing there, fuming.

Hugo blocked him, hand on his shoulder. “While your logic could use some work, I suppose I can humor your determination to be saved by me...” Hugo willed his glare into something more mocking. “If you say please.”

Oh, if looks could kill.

“Jackass,” Varian muttered.

“What was that,” Hugo cupped his ear, leaning closer as if to hear him better.

Varian grit his teeth. “Please.”

Hugo linked his arm with Varian’s at the elbow. “You’re welcome.”

Varian elbowed him in the gut, breaking his hold.

So, yeah. Rome wasn’t built in a day.

Today, the library was loud and bustling, and the evil step-librarians had already been told not to shush people.

There, Legacy Day attire was being handed out.

In character with the kind of school that has a dress-like-your-destiny dress code, even this momentous day had one.

Every year, the attire worn by the ascending students was passed down to them from the previous fairytale figures to their successors. The administration didn’t really trust all of them to hold onto their attires safely, resulting in the school keeping them hidden away in storage until the legacy day

they are needed again. After that, they're handed to the students, who are allowed to make as many adjustments as they like as long as they're brought back to continue the cycle anew.

A sort of connecting tissue.

As if the whole signing-up-to-live-the-same-shit-all-over-again wasn't enough.

Thus, for the roommates, the first errand had to be in the library. They stood in line, waiting to be given their attire.

There, Hugo found himself on edge. He had refused to step into the library since his being witnessed there by Mrs. Her Majesty the White Queen, leaving a job. He had been witnessed there, along with his roommate.

Remembering his blunder, he was acutely aware of Varian's presence at his side now. His unwitting accomplice. His new confidant (sort of).

Hugo nudged him with his shoulder. "I must say, this feels a little on-its-head."

"How so?"

Hugo gestured between the two of them for a moment.

Ah. This. Us. Varian silently acknowledged.

"I mean," Hugo adjusted his glasses. "I can understand why you'd run to me of all people. I'm really extraordinary, as you are aware."

"Nope. That's news to me," Varian deadpanned.

A silence followed. It left Varian hopeful. Maybe they could just not talk all day.

"Although," Hugo smirked at Varian's suddenly frustrated expression. He continued anyway. "I do have a quick question: Why all the running from your family?"

Varian looked anywhere but at the taller young man. "For now, let's just say they ain't exactly fans of science, and of my choices. Or, not a fan of me *having* choices. It's better to avoid the inevitable fight."

Hugo's throat felt dry.

"Do you want to," the blond coughed. "Talk about it?"

Truly, everything is easier said in the dark.

The freckled student rubbed his face. "I'm really tired of talking, Hugo."

The blond nearly doubled over. "Oh thank god. So am I."

Varian frowned. "Well, don't sound so disappointed."

Hugo shrugged. "Can you really blame me?"

The way the emotions of that night had completely drained them both could not be overstated.

The line moved forward, and the roommates moved with it.

As it did, student after student walked past, black garment bag in hand. The protective fabric gave away no details of the outfits themselves.

Varian hummed. “Bet you I can guess what these will look like.”

Hugo raised an eyebrow. “Doesn’t seem very fun. Most of them are heading to tailor next, so it’s not like we’ll know if you’re right. What’s the point?”

Varian swayed in place. “Passes the time. Would you rather I talk to *you* ?”

Hugo crossed his arms, resigning his argument.

The blue streak haired student watched as student after student walked by, making quiet guesses as they went.

Then, a familiar face caught Varian’s eye. “Eugene!”

His friend waved to him, bag in hand, yelled. “Good luck today! Text the chat back asap! Rapunzel’s worried. We’re meeting up later,” Eugene laughed. He briefly noticed Hugo standing by his friend, and made a face.

“My phone was deaaa... And he’s not gonna hear me.” Varian watched his friend rush out of the library. *And I left it in my room.* Varian realized with a groan.

“Fool’s gold,” Hugo said before the freckled young man had the chance.

“Oh, so now you’re joining in?”

“Just calling it like I see it. Next time don’t let your friends distract you.”

Then, drifting by went a very recognizable student made of wood, Cedar Wood. “Hi Hugo,” she called out.

“Purple color scheme, maybe green,” Varian said, quickly. Hugo scoffed. Varian, proud of himself, continued. “Maybe something with trees.”

Cedar waved to Hugo again, unsure if he heard her.

If only to get her to stop, Hugo waved back. Varian stared up at him.

Hugo felt his eyes on him. “What?”

“I just,” Varian gestured widely with his arms, despite sounding unsure. “You know, I always assumed you were popular. You’re pretty cool, but I rarely see you be friendly with other students. You and Cedar friends?”

Hugo scratched the back of his neck. “Not really. We talked, like, twice.”

“I mean,” Varian started to say. “Technically, if talking twice is all a friendship takes, then we would be friends, since we talk a lot so I’m not sure that’s—”

Hugo chuckled. “Talking? I think you mean arguing.”

“Touché”

Then, giggling like a bundle of clattering spoons, Maddie Hatter ran by, bag in hand.

It didn’t take much to guess what her attire would include.

“Hat.” Varian and Hugo said at the same time. They snickered to themselves. Definitely not together.

A beat passed.

“Did you just call me cool?!” Anyone in earshot would have been able to tell Hugo was smiling like a smug asshole.

“Get your ears checked, Glasses,” Varian threw Hugo’s own words back at him.

The blond’s face felt sunny as he grinned wide. “Oh I am gonna remember that one.”

The line moved forward, and they had finally reached the front.

An unwelcome presence came rolling into their atmosphere, like storm clouds.

The Headmaster stared them down.

“Cast. Gale,” Grimm addressed, checking them off a list on a clipboard. He then motioned to the staff to get their predecessors outfits from storage. “Can I assume that you are both keeping your noses clean after your recent detentions?”

Oh right. Their detentions. Varian and Hugo glanced at each other. In all the chaos of the past few days, that kinda fell to the wayside of both roommates minds. Even Hugo, in all his worry about being found in the library, gave little thought to the detention itself.

The Headmaster looked at Hugo like he was a buzzing, irksome little nat. Hugo looked at Grimm like he was a blood sucking mosquito.

Varian felt quite forgotten as he watched this silent exchange.

The staff reappeared, holding two garment bags.

Grimm straightens himself. “Remember to return the attire to the school no later than a week after tomorrow.”

Without another word, the pair got the hell out of there.

Varian replayed what he’d just witnessed in his mind. Curiosity got the better of him, as it usually did.

“Speaking of lingering questions,” Varian whispered, once they were a safe distance from any unwanted listeners. “How’d Grimm find out about your situation?”

He was talking about Hugo being adopted. Hugo knew that, but for a split second, he thought he was referring to the thefts. Varian still didn't know, and he hoped it would stay that way.

Hugo's mouth twisted into a sneer. "Some people can't mind their business."

In his tone was a degree of contempt Varian did not think Hugo capable of. He had seen him be pissed before (hell, even the previous day). But even so, it surprised him. It shouldn't have. His own surprise surprised him.

Then, Varian's mouth formed a thin line, remembering how he himself found out: by not minding his business and asking (prying).

Hugo's expression softened. "I wasn't talking about you."

Varian's relief was short-lived.

Then, a distant voice crackled in their ears. But only one of them recognized the sound. Varian bolted in the opposite direction. "Actually, let's take a different way out." Hugo was too occupied keeping up with his hurrying roommate to argue that the new direction would take them out the back of the school. So much for getting to the tailor quickly.

Grimm stood at the Legacy Day attire distribution station.

He preferred to greet the parents or guardians of his school's students the day before Legacy Day, if possible. Often, they came with conversations and grieves that were better gotten out of the way before the most important day of every school year.

A prime example approached: Varian Gale's father, Quirin Gale. Two others followed beside him, a tall, bulky woman with stark white hair and a skittish, slouching man with a fur-lined jacket.

The Headmaster had seen stranger families.

"Welcome to—"

"Has my nephew been here?" the tall woman demanded.

Grimm tried to school his expression. "Yes, a little while ago."

The slouching man tilted where he stood, looking unsurprised. "Told ya."

The father said nothing.

"Yes, well," Grimm spoke. "I can imagine many parents and guardians are being forced to handle such behaviors today. But I can assure you, none of these behaviors, nor this momentary trend of Rebels will be of real issue tomorrow."

Quirin frowned.

"What do you mean Rebels?"

Bookend Village was booming the day before Legacy Day.

Every boutique and tailor shop in the area was packed with students getting the outfits presentable. For some, this required minor measurement adjustments. For others, a near complete overhaul. While this did put a heavy workload on these establishments, the money they were raking in (along with the magic used to get it all done on time), made every boutique feel happily buzzing and busy, and vaguely smelling like perfume.

Maybe that was actual perfume.

The roommates had opted for the same store: the Gingerbread Boutique.

For what felt like the billionth time, Varian lifted his arm for the small attendant; a fairy, from the looks of it. She jotted down the number, and flew away. The freckled student slumped into his seat. The sooner this was over the better.

“Seriously, I don’t get it,” Hugo’s muffled voice echoed from behind a closed changing stall.

Varian sat, head in his head. He had no plans to try anything on that day. He’d sworn up and down he would *not* try on the Legacy Day outfit he had been passed down to use, giving the go ahead to the tailors to scrap the thing for parts to be used in the new designs (which required his measurements and a sign-off on the new design ideas). He was just glad that he was *allowed* to do so. The only requirement was that at least *some* of the previous version of the clothing remain present.

Outside of school code though, his family being absent made that decision a whole lot simpler to make.

In contrast, Hugo’s modifications were much more detail-oriented, since his successor’s outfit had been much more unisex in design. Hugo had no qualms about trying on said outfit to give the little magic tailors a better look at what modifications would be needed.

“What’s there to get?” Varian yelled at the curtain.

Hugo stepped out. The getup he had inherited was... okay. If Hugo had to describe it honestly, he’d call it plain old boring. Aesthetically, the old thing clashed with his usual style. It was your typical formal wear, and not very *Sorcerer* -ish. Gray on gray, with no pizzazz in sight. That didn’t exactly surprise him. Don wasn’t the type to fuss about the details of clothes. On the plus side, it fit Hugo decently, so only a few adjustments would be necessary. Functional as it was though, it wasn’t quite *him*.

But, with a few modifications... Yeah, he could make this work.

“The mom stuff I get, mostly,” Hugo said. “Missing Mom. Destiny scares you. Yada yada.”

Varian glared. *The delicacy of a jackhammer.*

“But avoiding your family?” Hugo continued. “That doesn’t check out in my mind,” Hugo swayed where he stood, hands in the pockets of his attire. “To me, it seems like your family should be extra encouraging to you. Wouldn’t they understand better than anyone else *why* you’d not be into your destiny?”

“Wow,” Varian feigned amazement and surprise. “You’re so right,” he said with a cold, beaming expression. “You really don’t get it.”

Hugo held up his hands. “I’m just saying. They didn’t seem like total nightmares on that call earlier.”

Then again, his only real point of reference was Don. Hugo couldn’t begin to imagine Don talking to him about something as trivial as trees or favorite guardians. He certainly couldn’t imagine her laughing like she meant it.

“Trust me,” Varian said. “I have a million examples.” Not all of which he was about to share with his asshole (though, less of an asshole than he first thought) roommate.

The fairy employee floating by Hugo’s head twiddled her words louder, tapping her airborne foot impatiently. Noticing her, the blond answered her questions: What were the details of the changes he was asking for, what specific parts of the getup he wanted moved around, details, embroidery, shades; the works.

Question after question followed, each more specific than the last.

“Dark green, thank you,” Hugo said, waving her off, turning back to his roommate to speak. But, in a flash, the tailor came back holding fabric samples. They were slightly different shades and textures. The blond tapped his chin, finding himself stuck. Even such small details mattered to him now. After all, if he was going to sign (finally), he wanted to do it looking his best.

Varian watched his roommate hem and haw over the smallest details for an exorbitant amount of time. The fairy dealing with him looked progressively more and more annoyed with his stalling.

While Varian was happier being stuck with Hugo than he would’ve been being stuck with his family, he didn’t want to spend all day here. He made his way over to the blond. Varian hummed as he looked over his shoulder at the fabrics.

“Go with this one. The ceremony’s probably gonna be long, so pick the more comfortable material.”

“I was thinking the same thing, thank you very much.”

“Sure you were,” Varian said sarcastically.

It was then that Hugo noticed how annoyed the employee was with him. He mentally kicked himself for acting like some kind of self-centered royal. “This one,” Hugo made a decision (which was the one Varian suggested, but totally coincidentally). The attendant flew away.

Hugo looked his roommate up and down. All farmer-vibes and clashing colors and not really paying attention to the blond, who *ahem- ed*. “Since when do you have a sense of style?”

“Since when did I not?”

“Since you made a habit of dressing in plaid and spitting in the face of color theory,” Hugo smirked. “Which is always.”

Varian crossed his arms. “School dress code. Gotta match my destiny. If I had the choice, you’d see just how well-dressed I can be.”

“Not interested,” Hugo tapped his roommate on the forehead, leaving his face scrunched.

After both their garments were taken away for modifications, the staff assisting them managed to get their attention long enough to usher them out of the store. They were told to come back in a while for the finished products.

As soon as they left, more students were escorted into the buzzing building. The roommates were happy to be out of the frying pan.

As they walked away, Varian’s mind spun. As if out of nowhere, from Hugo’s perspective, the shorter student spoke. “What does your destiny entail, exactly?”

“What?” Hugo gave him a weird look.

“I mean, your limitations. Like, the Evil Queen can’t have a happy ending, and Snow White can’t be a villain—”

Hugo scoffed at the last one. “Debatable,” he muttered.

Varian continued. “For me, Dorothy doesn’t leave the farm after their story. I know that limitation and what it *means* to have that over my head. I’ve seen it. So, I can assume you know your own destiny’s limitations, right?”

Do I? Hugo considered his words.

Varian froze.

A trio of adults were heading towards them down the road. They were talking amongst themselves, not even looking ahead at the moment.

Despite having only seen them through a phone screen, the taller student recognized them only a moment after his roommate did.

Hugo’s hand wrapped around Varian’s arm. One minute they were standing in the road, the next they were hiding in the space between two buildings.

“Hey!” Varian yelped, an involuntary response. Hugo shushed him.

Voices approached. Despite recognizing them, Varian did not react. He stood there, not even breathing, waiting to see if he’d been found by those he was determined to avoid.

“Hey, that’s three stores down,” Adira said, a glimpse of her hair visible from where the roommates hid. “Only a few more to go.”

“But, by the time we find the right one, he might already be gone,” Hector threw his words at her.

As the two siblings argued, Varian’s father stood by, demeanor like he had the whole sky on his head. “What are we going to do with him?” He asked, like it was the question of how to solve world peace, or stop the sun from burning.

Adira and Hector became silent.

Quirin exhaled. Then, he kept moving forward. His siblings followed.

Near-sounding steps eventually faded into silence.

Varian slumped against the wall, his legs threatening to break beneath him. As the ringing in his ears faded, he became aware of the sound of his roommate's breathing. He looked up and got his wits back enough to realize how close he was to Hugo; the blond's hand was still on his upper arm.

"Um," he said, quieter than he intended. "You can let go now."

It was hard to tell, because of the lighting where they hid, but for a slip second Varian swore he saw Hugo look bashful.

Then the moment was gone.

Practically teleporting out away, Hugo jumped out of the alley.

"Saved by me twice in one day?" the blond flipped his ponytail. "Well, no need to thank me."

Varian returned to his side. "Good. Wasn't gonna."

Hugo ignored his ire. "Come on. While we wait for our outfits, I'd like to go check on the list. It should be posted by now."

Varian grimaced. "Right, the list."

Together they walked. In the back of the shorter student's mind, he made sure to be aware of his surroundings, and who was nearby. That had been too close. He did not want to risk running into his family again. At least, not today. Let him deal with tomorrow's emotions when tomorrow comes.

What list you may ask?

Why, it's the order in which all the students will be signing the Storybook of Legends, of course!

Countless students were crowded around the laminated paper, attached to the outdoor stage where the Storybook signings would be taking place.

"Oh my god, Raven!" Apple White, daughter of Snow White, (also, the most well known Royal student), exclaimed, bubbling with joy. "You're going right after me!"

Varian glanced at Raven, daughter of the Evil Queen (and, the most well known Rebel student), looking sick to her stomach. Without a word, she brushed her way out of the crowd, careful not to jostle anyone but still moving as fast as she could.

"Raven! Where are you going?" Apple followed, and the crowd parted for her. If they hadn't, Varian was fairly certain she would have run into multiple people in her hurry.

Not paying as much attention as his roommate was, Hugo's eyes stayed fixed on the list, finding his name amongst the many. "Eh, I can live with that."

He wasn't exactly going first, but that didn't matter. Nothing mattered but knowing that he was going to *be* on that stage. The thing he had been working towards since he was small was finally

going to be here. Safety, security, destiny.

“I’m going before you,” Varian said.

Hugo made a face. “What?”

“I’m going before Rapunzel too,” Varian said, voice devoid of emotion. “And Eugene, and almost all of my friends.”

The blond shook his head. “I’m confused. Why is that an issue?”

“It’s not,” Varian ran a hand through his blue-streaked hair, shaking himself from his stupor. “Just makes it all feel more real.”

Hugo’s brow furrowed.

“Well, you know what’s even more real?” Hugo asked. Varian raised an eyebrow. “My stomach,” the blond swung his arm, getting the both of them out of the crowd. “I haven’t eaten anything since breakfast. What you say we stop at the castleteria on our way back to the boutique. Hell, I’ll even pay for it.”

“Our meal plans are pre-paid.”

They argued about this the entire way there, and even a little as they ate.

Eventually, they did make it back to the boutique.

By that point, the place was so crowded that both roommates had to wait almost an hour to get their Legacy Day getups.

But they got them, eventually, and they were so fed up with the wait that they didn’t even stay to try on the updated versions. With the magic these boutiques used, neither was concerned about potential mistakes.

Overall, it had just been a long day.

As they walked back towards the school, Varian spoke up.

“Thanks.”

Hugo blinked. “For what?” He smirked. “There’s so many possibilities.”

Varian chose not to take the bait, speaking seriously. “You know. For helping me avoid my family. Even if you don’t really get why I wanted to.”

Hugo hacked out a laugh. “Are you kidding me? I deserve a *parade* for doing this. You never mentioned that your family looks that scary!” The blond complained. “No but for real, why does your family look like they could teach advanced Hero Training, with a specialization in breaking necks?”

Varian rolled his eyes, seriousness fading away. “How brave of you to assist me,” he said, sarcastic.

“Since I was indeed very brave,” Hugo shoved his black garment bag into Varian’s open hand. “You can carry that for me. It was getting heavy.”

Without pausing in his stride, Varian dropped the bag onto the ground.

The blond scrambled to pick it back up, finding that the clothes inside were unharmed.

“Raised in a barn, much?”

“Oh yes. The scariest of barns,” Varian called back.

Hugo couldn’t help but glare as he sped walked back to his roommate’s side.

Once again, to the average onlooker, perhaps they would’ve looked like friends. Obviously, they would deny the idea in an instant.

Back in their room, Olivia sat in a sunny spot by the window.

When the door opened, she did not immediately bother looking.

Then she did. Then she screeched, as the raccoon on the floor did the same.

In her robotic systems, she set off an alarm that connected to only one person’s mirror phone.

“If Ruddiger or Olivia made a mess, I swear,” Varian muttered.

“You will do nothing to Olivia. She has never done anything wrong in her life!” Hugo protested. *Except for the shit she’s done to me personally.*

Hugo’s phone buzzed in his pocket. “Hang on,” he took it out.

Varian didn’t get a chance to see what he read before he watched his roommate start sprinting down the hall.

“Hey! W-what’s wrong?”

Hugo did not respond. In his mind ran only one thought, over and over again.

Someone’s in my room.

If school officials were in his room, it could only mean that they were there to search for evidence.

He’d been caught. He’d be kicked out of school. He wouldn’t get to sign.

When he finally reached his room and swung the door open, not thinking clearly enough to try and be calm, Varian was back at his side.

Varian would much rather have found Ruddiger burning the whole room down than what actually lay before him.

His family was there.

Quirin stood, expression characteristically unreadable. “Varian.”

Varian straightened himself. “Dad.”

While his father kept staring at him alone, Adira (with Ruddiger purring happily at her feet) and Hector’s fell on Hugo, still reeling from relief.

“This your roommate?”

Suddenly, Hugo felt like he was a fish amongst sharks. “I’ll,” he stepped back, “give you all some space.”

Then Varian gave Hugo a look. He said nothing, but kept his blue eyes on his green ones.

Somehow, Hugo kept walking.

He made it only a few yards down the hall before he stopped. He leaned against the wall, popped in his headphones, and listened to something on his phone.

“I...” Varian shifted where he stood. “I got my errands done. The outfit and everything. I checked where I’ll be in the order and it’s not that bad,” he smiled. “It’s funny actually, I’m going right before—”

“Are you not going to sign?”

Varian felt his soul leave his body.

His silence spoke louder than anything he could have said in his own defense.

“Son,” Quirin stated. “I’ve endured your little projects at home, and I did it because you were using them to help the farm. That is, when they worked. I even bit my tongue when you enrolled yourself in three science courses this year, and when you wouldn’t call home. I could entertain this hobby of yours because I know this is as difficult for you as it was for,” Quirin faltered. “For your mother. But this?”

“If you say you understand, then you’ll know why—” Varian sputtered out his words. “You can’t ask me not to even consider it!”

“Do you want us to disappear?”

Varian’s voice became smaller. “It might not happen.”

“Son,” Quirin insisted.

There was really only one answer. “No.”

“Good,” Quirin said. “After tomorrow, I’ll be pulling you out of this school.”

“What?!” Varian screamed, managing to make Quirin flinch. “ I still have more than half a year to go!”

His father’s tone remained even. “I’ve made up my mind. After you sign, this is over. You’re going home. You can finish your schooling there.”

Varian whipped his head to look at Adira and Hector, silently demanding their help. What he received in return were two cold stares.

“We had a deal!” Varian said to his father.

“That was before this school began to encourage your worst tendencies. Do you understand?”

“No, no, you can’t—”

Varian saw his father step closer.

Do you understand?” Quirin repeated, unmoved.

Varian, small, replied. “Yes, sir.”

Without another word, he walked past his son and out the door.

Uncle Hector avoided his nephew, leaving quietly.

Aunt Adira put a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

Varian stood there, willing his hands to stop shaking, and his teeth to stop grinding themselves into dust.

Standing outside, clearly wearing headphones, stood Hugo, leaning against a wall down the hallway. It would be very surprising if he’d heard any of that.

Surprising, yes.

Discreetly, he clicked his screen, disconnecting his headphones from Olivia’s speakers.

With a seriousness he did not display often, Hugo walked back into his dorm room.

Varian hadn’t even looked at him yet, but he walked right up to him.

“Do you have my phone number?”

“What?”

Hugo snatched the phone from off Varian’s bed, flashed it in front of the freckled student’s face to open it (prompting Varian to curse that stupid facial recognition tech), and rapidfire adding himself to the contacts.

“There,” Hugo tossed it back to him. Varian almost dropped it in his stupor.

Realization dawned on the shorter student.

“It’s rude to eavesdrop, you know.”

“It’s also rude to yank students out of their schools when they don’t want to leave,” Hugo countered.

Varian felt seen. “Are you saying you’re gonna miss me?”

“Not in the slightest,” Hugo didn’t even look back, heading to his own desk. “I just don’t like when a perfectly good competition ends with a forced stalemate.”

Varian rolled his eyes.

The glow of a new notification turned his head. It was from his friends’ group chat. Varian read up.

“Crap,” he grabbed his jacket. The group was already at the cafe. He’d completely forget Eugene mentioned that! *Well, not like I could’ve checked my phone today.*

Varian had one gloved hand on the door handle, when a thought stuck him. Annoying and small, but somehow unable to stay in his head.

“Hey, Hugo?”

The blond hummed.

“Do you want to join me to get coffee? My friends all meet up there.” *Please say no.* Varian mentally begged.

“Uh, no,” Hugo saluted him, looking unamused. “I served my time today. I’d like to be free of your presence, even for a little while.”

Oh. A tinge of disappointment, foreign and off-key, breezed through Varian. Not simply about the coffee. “Then you must be thrilled I might be going home for good soon,” he pointed out, gallows humor seeping through.

“Well, you’re not planning on signing. Doubt they’ll throw you back on the farm without *that* insurance. So we have nothing to worry about.” Hugo said.

Varian’s ears felt warm. “We?”

“The royal we,” Hugo countered, smiling. “As in myself. Please exclude me from your bullshit.”

“You included *yourself*!” Varian snorted. “Your highness.”

“Don’t you have a gang of weirdos to meet up, farm boy?”

Varian sputtered, before slamming the door shut on his way.

Hugo's grin faded in an instant.

For a moment, Hugo truly hoped Varian really would refuse to sign.

Then the moment was gone, because he remembered something critical.

Varian was going *before* Hugo in the signing order. If Varian, or anyone else, didn’t sign, it would completely disrupt Legacy Day. Probably bring the whole thing to a dead stop.

Hugo's sympathy only stretched so far. He'd worked too hard to actively want anything put in his way now, at the goddamn *finish line*.

At the cafe, it did not take the-next-Dorothy long to find his friends.

He spotted them before they spotted him. His friends. All he could think about was how this may be the last time he hung out with them here.

Maybe.

He decided then and there that he wouldn't tell them about what his dad said. He needed their jovialness, now more than ever.

He called out to them.

"Varian!" Rapunzel scrambled out of her seat, taking him by the shoulders. "How are you? Are you holding up okay?" She moved his bangs out of his eyes, as if she could see his stress plain on his face. Maybe she could. Varian had no trouble believing so.

He shook his hand like an unbalanced platform.

Rapunzel grimaced. "That bad?"

"Worse."

The duo took their seats. Varian looked around at his friends, counting a few missing from their ranks.

"Where's Nuru?"

"Still busy with the Royal Student Council." Rapunzel sighed. "I managed to slip away, but she wanted to stay. She's really excited for Legacy Day."

"I mean, she is Nuru. She's literally starry eyed. If anyone's gonna love their destiny, it would be her."

"Same can be said for that kid, Yong," Eugene added. "That little guy was attached to your hip when he first got here. I've never seen someone so excited about their story."

Varian remembered the boy saying he would be with his family for the day. He always saw them on weekends when he went home (being so young meant he preferred to commute to school), but he seemed too excited to have them come for the ceremony. Varian envied that. He also envied his enthusiasm for their story, in a way. It must be easier.

Lance raised his cup of coffee. "To Nuru and Yong. The only Royals worth a damn."

Rapunzel raised her coffee too. "And to Hugo!"

Eugene sputtered. "Why?"

"Because he's just as happy to have his destiny as Nuru and Yong are."

Eugene looked at him like he'd lost his mind. "Fine, but he's not not our friend!"

"Not yet," Rapunzel sipped her mug, her eyes fixed on Varian.

The dark haired, freckled student laughed nervously, although he wasn't sure why. "So, did you all see the list?"

"Yep," Cass sighed. "What a relief."

"What do you mean?" Varian asked.

"Of everyone in our merry band, you're going first."

"But why's that such a relief?"

Cass nudged Rapunzel, who giggled. "You've been busy. We've all been talking, and the more we think about it, the more we have the same plans you do."

"Plans to..." Varian was starting to see the picture.

"Not sign the book!" Lance smiled.

Rapunzel, Cass, and Eugene all nodded with Lance.

Varian expression crumbled into joy. He wasn't alone. He knew he wasn't before, but looking around now, he felt the kind of courage only power in numbers could give. Even if it was only the five of them.

And yet, the next words that fell from his mouth came without that warm courage. "You aren't worried about disappearing?"

"You're making it sound like *you're* the worried one," Eugene said. "That doesn't sound like you at all, Mr. Throw-the-goop-into-the-pot-first-ask-questions-later."

"I'm a man of science," Varian reminded him. "I have to consider every possibility."

"You know what *I'm* considering," Cass jumped in. "That that information came from Grimm, who is constantly full of shit."

Laughter bubbled in all of them, fanning the flames of their bravery.

"If you can do it, why can't we," Eugene took Rapunzel's hand as he spoke. She kissed his cheek.

At her other side, Rapunzel linked an arm with Varian.

Lance threw an arm around Varian's shoulder.

Across the table, Cass sipped her coffee, smiling in that specific way only she could. From her, it was like a hug.

Surrounded by his friends, Varian felt invincible. He could do this!

And yet.

A persistent whisper of fear refused to leave him.

After they finished up at the cafe, and went their separate directions, that whisper grew louder.

If he didn't sign, he risked his family, and himself, disappearing.

If he did sign, he would let down his friends.

He tried to make those scenarios feel equal, but he couldn't. He just couldn't.

Varian had no idea what he would do tomorrow.

A little while later, Hugo heard a knock. He didn't bother getting his hopes up. Varian didn't knock, and neither did he. They were both kinda assholes that way.

This had better be cause something is on fire.

At the door, a set of starry eyes greeted him.

"Did Varian already leave?" Nuru asked.

"Yep."

"Shit. I was hoping I'd catch him before left."

"Why not go to the cafe then?" She must've been invited.

She was. "I would, but I've only got a minute before I gotta head back to the preparations with the Royal Student Council. I wanted to wish him luck, in case I don't see him before the ceremony tomorrow," Nuru smiled. "I can't wait to get on that big, glittering stage."

Hugo gave a half hearted nod. "You and me both, Practically-a-Princess."

"You and I," she corrected.

Hugo tilted his head, silently saying *Yeah, yeah, whatever*. He almost closed the door then and there, but he didn't.

"Hey, quick question. Have you ever thought about how destiny might limit us?"

The starry eyed student blinked.

"That is such a weird question dude," Nuru whispered, a little stunned.

"Tell that to my roommate. He asked me earlier. I figure a fellow royal," Hugo repressed a shudder. He still hated that word, even if at school it didn't mean you were actual royalty. "Such as yourself, would have a take on it."

"I mean, I love my destiny, but I have thought about that. My limits just aren't as bad as most," Nuru said, a little somber, but no less sparkly. "Nursery rhymes like mine have so much unwritten about them. It allows for a lot more."

Yet another concept that threw Hugo for a loop. “What do you mean?”

“Limitations are created by what your story says you can or can’t do, right? Well, the unwritten things, the stuff that’s never mentioned, never conflicts with anything we become, is kinda up to us, isn’t it?”

Hugo considered her words in silence.

“Well, I suppose that’s easy for a nursery rhyme to say, right?” Nuru laughed.

The conversation fizzled out from there. Nuru left to attend more Royal Student Council preparations for the next day.

Hugo tried to put those words out of his mind. He worked and studied that night, trying to maintain some normalcy. Nothing bad happened in normalcy. Nothing would go wrong tomorrow. Nothing *could* go wrong.

Ready or not, tomorrow would come for all of them.

Chapter End Notes

Hope y’all enjoyed! I am very excited to hear y’all’s thoughts of this chapter, as well as the next few. REMEMBER TO DRINK WATER!!!! And get some sleep!!!

Shoutout and thank you to TheArtistsMuse for helping me plan this chapter!

Legacy Day

Chapter Summary

Legacy Day is here. Choices have to be made.

Chapter Notes

Here we are.

So, I kinda got hit by the ao3 author curse. I was sick for a long while, so I was in no condition to write. Feeling better now!

For those who have been waiting patiently for us to get to Legacy Day, I applaud your dedication. You will be well rewarded. Hope you enjoy!

Side note - There was one particular song I listened to while writing this chapter and that song was 30/90 from Tick Tick Boom. The lyrics are very Varian-core here: “You’re not into making choices, wicked witches, poppy fields, or men behind the curtain... ruby slippers, clock is ticking that’s for certain.”

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Alone, Hugo stood at the entrance to the school.

Tonight, he would sign his name in the Storybook of Legends, and tie himself to his tale as the next Sorcerer's Apprentice and the Happily-Ever-After that came with it. He was certainly dressed for the part.

Using the attire of his predecessor (with quite a few necessary changes, within reason), the tailors outdid themselves. Over a gray dress shirt, he wore a deep green buttonless suit jacket. On the right sleeve, from the elbow down, a pattern of embroidered silver stars, and a little design of a broom at the cuff. The real standout of it all was the black one-shoulder cape. Per his request, the tailors lined the bottom of the cape with something that made it simmer. Not any ordinary little sparkles like rhinestones. Nope, these were pure magic. Just enough to add some flair, but not enough to look overdone. It was his favorite aspect of the whole thing.

Well, second favorite.

From the little shirt pocket by his heart, hidden by the half cape, Olivia popped out.

Hugo gave her a cleaning earlier that day, so she was all gold and shiny. If he got to look his best for the ceremony, so would she.

Olivia glanced around, confused why her friend was standing around all alone. Hugo gave her a little scratch behind her ear, eyes still fixed on the road. “Don’t worry. She’ll be here.”

Adjusting his glasses, Hugo barely resisted the urge to mess with his braided hair. He’d never been very good at braiding his own hair, but he made a point to learn as the years went by. Today, especially, he was glad to have the skill. Earlier, staring at his handiwork in the mirror, he’d realized he resembled Don and her signature silver braid. Even if only a little.

Donella was late, and he didn’t want to face the night without her. Not after all she’d given him.

Then, Hugo watched a car drive up, stopping in front of the school.

Donella stepped out of the passenger door. Before acknowledging her successor’s presence, she spoke to her right hand man. “Cyrus. Come get me at the agreed time. I won’t be staying all night.”

Her son managed to laugh. “Just long enough to see me do my thing, right?”

His mother watched the car drive off. Once it was in the distance, she addressed him. “Don’t ask obvious questions, Hugo,” she bit back. “Of course I will.”

Then she proceeded up the steps, seemingly unconcerned whether Hugo was following in her speedy wake. He was. She was clearly in a foul mood.

“What’s got you so peeved?” *Hopefully still not my screw up in the library*, he thought. “Isn’t this a celebration?” He asked.

“For you, yes,” Donella said, practically breathing smoke. “But for me, this is an exercise in diplomacy.”

Diplomacy?

Right as her meaning struck him, they reached the main venue.

Even back during rehearsal, Hugo could not have come close to imagining exactly how the outdoor space would look, and feel, on the day. He could barely believe it now.

The entire venue was grand. In the distance sat the stage. Marble white and covered in green vines, it was bathed in spotlight, emanating from the frames of four massive floating mirror-shaped projectors. They would be there to project the image of whoever happened to be on stage to the audience. The seating arrangements were already set up. Students in the front section of seats, families in the back section. No one was sitting yet, though. So, *so* many parents and guardians, with their students, mingling and chatting, as jovial as they were well-dressed.

Speaking of idiotic levels of happiness, the (very soon to be) Sorcerer’s Apprentice was nothing short of jovial. Ecstatic. Over the moon. There were no words strong enough to describe Hugo’s state of mind. He was actually here. Legacy Day!

He couldn’t imagine happiness better than this.

Well, just short of the happiness he was sure he’d feel after actually signing his name. And then everything after that.

Then, he'd be rid of this unsteadiness. The unconscious, omnipresent suspicion that this happiness would be ripped from him at any time. For years it stuck to him, like a bad cold. It was part of him, to his core.

A part that he was ready to throw away.

Following in her wake, Hugo watched Don as she expertly weaved her way through the crowd, intent on avoiding any of the royal head of state figures who were almost perpetually asking for her assistance with their frivolous problems. *Ah. Diplomacy.* Hugo understood. He surveyed the crowd, like she was doing. A sea of people surrounded him, all dressed to the brim. The "haves" in their glitz and glamor. Hugo refused to sneer. He refused to give himself and his thoughts away.

Among them, he spotted Rapunzel O'Hair, with her parents.

"You really went all out changing your mothers attire, Junior," her father said.

Hugo chuckled. Right. Rapunzel's mother was also called Rapunzel, although her's was a name *and* a title.

Rapunzel (Jr.) beamed. "A deal's a deal," she said.

Her outfit definitely contrasted with her parents' attire. While they opted for standard formal styles, their daughter was dressed more creatively. Her hair was braided. She wore a green dress, with layers and frills like vines. Off her shoulders and around her in an almost perfect semicircle was a white cape, with a brick like pattern to it. The way it framed her, it was like she was the tower itself. Hugo had to admit, only to himself of course, it was a little more creative than most of the royal looks today.

Rapunzel's mother waved to someone in the crowd, motioning for her daughter to follow her over there. The blonde young woman took a small step and almost fell on her face.

Her mother caught her. "Shoes for the day, then back to barefoot," she reminded her, sympathetic but firm.

"A deal's a deal," Rapunzel repeated. and the princess laughed.

It was only then that Hugo realized the heels she was wearing. Guess that was how she got her parents to let her be so creative with the old clothes.

His gaze was quickly pulled from her, however, when he saw a prime example of typical royalty attire today.

Lance Midas, true to his story of turning objects and people around him to gold, was wearing a gold suit, gold gloves, and even a gold necklace and earring. His parents wore their own touches of gold, here and there on their persons. They looked so proud of Lance. So openly, unabashedly enthused for him.

Hugo glanced at Don, finding her not paying attention to him. He was not surprised. He went back to staring at Rapunzel and Lance.

All his staring ended in disaster, though, because they actually noticed him.

“Hugo!” Rapunzel ran over to him (as best she could in her shoes), Lance tagging along. “Have you seen Varian around? He isn’t answering my texts.”

Hugo felt a strange kind of awkwardness in speaking to them when Don was around. Though she hid it well, she was immediately suspicious of them.

Hugo chuckled nervously. “Why would I know where he is?”

Lance coughed. “You literally live together.”

“Sure,” Hugo muttered. “But we’re not friends. Besides, I have more important things to deal with. So, if you’ll excuse me.”

Taking the lead, Hugo marched into the crowd. Don went along with him, happy to avoid those students’ royal parents. A small, satisfied look appeared on her face. Her son relished the pride it gave him.

“Royalty, am I right?”

Don hummed.

Unfortunately, going to the other side of the crowd only brought Hugo to a different set of problems (problems = people he doesn’t want to be bothered with).

Cassandra Lady looked ready to bite someone’s head off. Not literally; hopefully. Just in case, Hugo kept his distance.

She wore a white, bandana-like headband around her hair, as well as a light blue, straight and simple dress. A sharp contrast from her usual dark tones. It occurred to Hugo then that he couldn’t remember what story she was in. He knew, from some half-hearted comment from either her or Goggles (the blond hadn’t cared to pay attention at the time) that her role was as a lady-in-waiting of some kind to some obscure princess...

Maid Maleen, that was the story! Hugo didn’t know much of it. Still, he presumed (hoped) that her story had a happy end to it.

Next to her, someone nudged her side, clearly trying to cheer her up.

Eugene Pauper. What a strange story he had. To be an imposter royal. To be something he knew he was not, in place of another. But, one with a happy ending. An advisor to a prince-turned-king. He probably could have dressed in anything for that role. Like a pauper or like a pauper disguised as a prince. Clearly, he chose something in the middle. It was a fairly typical suit. Not too flashy, and not too simple. The design was good enough, but what stuck Hugo the most was the main color scheme, purple and gold. It didn’t suit Eugene well, which made Hugo wonder why he’d gone with it in the first place.

Then it hit him. Rapunzel often wore those.

Hugo rolled his eyes, considering himself lucky that he wasn’t in love. Clearly, it turned people into uncolor coordinated idiots who wanted out of their destiny because of a relationship. Out of pity, he kept his silent insults to a minimum (i.e. only a dozen or so).

“I remember that student,” Donella muttered. “You went to reform school with him.”

Hugo froze. “Yeah. I think so.”

Donella hummed. “Always good to remember your missteps from a distance.”

Right. Missteps.

In the back of his mind, Hugo wondered where his roommate was. After he left to meet with his friends yesterday, he hadn’t seen him come back. Not even when he’d finally fallen asleep (which was difficult to achieve thanks to his excitement for Legacy Day). Still, Goggles was there, sleeping, when the blond woke up. Hugo left their room early that morning. By the time he’d come back to get his attire, Varian was gone.

To be honest, not speaking to him all day was weird. Normally, they had classes together, and on the weekends they still lived in the same space, so it was hard to avoid him. A part of Hugo wanted to see him, if only out of a morbid curiosity for how he was holding up.

“Speaking of missteps,” Donella said, not bothering to finish her sentence. She started walking with a purpose through the crowd. Hugo caught up to her.

“Where are we—”

“I’d like to meet your roommate.”

Hugo’s brain stopped working. “What?”

In the distance, although he couldn’t see Goggles, Hugo did spot Varian’s father Quirin. He was about to point him out to Don, but there didn’t seem to be a need.

Looked like she already knew who he was.

Varian was exhausted. The day before Legacy Day, after spending time with his friends at the cafe, all the while not confiding his worries in them (not about his dad’s plans to bring him back home, not about his doubts about not-signing, none of it), Varian had gone straight to the school’s library.

Attire hand-out was over by then, and no one had classes to urgently study for, so the whole space was empty of people. All night, Varian scoured for any texts he could find on the Storybook of Legends. If no authorities would answer his questions about it, he would find them himself, he’d thought. But, there was nothing worth a damn in the entire library. Any books that mentioned the Storybook spoke of it broadly, with fluff and levity. There were not written examples of its power being challenged, or of any attempts at not-signing to a destiny.

Varian hadn’t made it back to his dorm until near five in the morning. If it weren’t for his family showing up, and their knocking at the door waking him up, Varian probably would have slept through the whole day.

That would’ve been fine with Varian.

But, here he was. Legacy Day.

Varian had never seen a space so filled with people. Through it all, his shadow remained triple in size. Despite his frustration with his family, and especially his dad, he stuck close to them, hoping

to avoid all the fancy clothes and people he really did not want to talk to.

In the meantime, his family wasn't too keen on talking to the other parents (that was just how they were) so that left him alone in the crowd to deal with them.

"Son," Quirin put a hand on his shoulder. "Are you feeling alright?"

Varian didn't mean to glare at him when he asked that. He didn't. Quirin noticed anyway. He took his hand off his shoulder, sighing. Varian shook himself. "Yeah, yeah. I'm okay. Just tired."

Beside him, his uncle swayed. "One of these days, that awful sleep schedule of yours is going to get you in trouble." Hector snorted at his own comment.

Adira elbowed her brother, before addressing her nephew. "Is there anyone you want to find before things get started?" she asked. "We have time."

Varian shrugged. "It's alright. No need to go searching. I'm sure we'll run into them."

He desperately wanted to see a friendly face. But he couldn't bear to search for his friends; his Rebel friends specifically. It wasn't even the presence of his family that deterred him. It was his own fears. His friends were counting on him to be the brave one today. He was going to be in line to sign before any of them.

At least, the friends that didn't want to sign.

"Varian!"

Emerging from the crowd, Nuru, smiling, approached him.

"Hey," she waved to his family. "And hi Varian's family!"

His relatives said hello.

Varian greeted her. He didn't think it was possible for her to be more sparkly than she was today. "You look awesome."

The dress she wore was out of this world. On the left side of the skirt, a cloud of pink velvet shone, layered over the main fabric. On top of that, miscellaneous strands of black voile fabric zigzagged here and there. From there, the fabrics faded into purples and blues. The further out the blues stretched, the more encrusted gems appeared, looking like stars in the sky. Her hair, in two space buns, was also covered in tiny gems on each separate end. It looked like she was wearing a corner of outer space.

"I know I do! It's supposed to resemble a nebula. Cause, you know, that's where stars are made," Nuru was practically vibrating with joy. "I've been planning it for weeks. I almost couldn't decide on what nebula I was gonna look like, cause they all look very different. But in the end I went with the Trifid nebula. The tailors had a ton of trouble with this part," she gestured to the pink. "So I actually ended up getting Rapunzel to help! I just saw Rapunzel actually," Nuru looked around. "Have you seen her yet? She said she's been looking for you."

Varian winced. "Not yet."

Nuru's sparkle diminished as she processed the look on his face. She was about to say something, but a burst of glittering magic from across the crowd caught her eye. It caught Varian's eye too, as well as others in the crowd. It was hard to miss.

"There's my family!" Nuru laughed. "They said they'd shoot up a flair when they needed me to regroup with them."

Varian whirled with potential questions on how her family's magic functioned. He knew it had to do with stars, as he'd seen her use it a bit in Magicology class. But was there a limit to how high they could go? Did it get stronger with years of practice? Could she literally affect space itself?

A few feet away, Varian heard his father let out a huff at the spectacle.

Varian shelved his questions. It was probably better if he didn't get all excited over magic in front of *his* family. He figured he could ask Nuru all those things later, though.

If he could, before he left for home. Varian thought, before shoving the idea to the back of his brain. "I'll see you on the stage." He gave her a thumbs up. "You're gonna knock it out of the park."

"Don't you mean," Nuru giggled. "Out of this world?" She was extraordinarily proud of herself. Varian chuckled alongside her. He was glad they were friends.

Then, before Nuru walked away, she took Varian's hand, held it tight, and said her next words quietly. "Everything is gonna be okay. For both of us."

It would be. Wouldn't it?

Varian watched his friend disappear into the crowd, off to find her family. He knew her words were meant to comfort, but they only sent his mind into further spirals. His research, panicked as it was, didn't exactly help calm his nerves. But now, as he considered the future once more, the more immediate problems came to mind.

What would happen if he didn't sign? If he, and everyone he loved, *didn't* "go poof" and disappear from existence? If he was in the clear, as his research refused to even suggest was possible, what would happen next?

Varian couldn't imagine his family would be thrilled. Probably even more afraid of him disappearing. Maybe they would take him home anyway. If they didn't, then he would get to stay at school. That would be nice. He would have his friends beside him to have his back, after he did that courageous thing. But they couldn't fight the school administrators. He would probably be hounded by them, constantly being urged to sign the Storybook and renounce his previous actions.

Grimm would probably take him out of all those non-destiny related classes that he worked so hard to be allowed into. They would call it "too dangerous" or "too rebellious" or whatever other bullshit they would say. With that closer eye on him and his scientific interests, the school would definitely prohibit him from using his alchemy; he wouldn't have the "it's for my classes" excuse at hand anymore. Not a magical destiny, and no science or magic classes meant that would be over for him while he was in school.

Not to mention the reactions from other students. Varian had always done a decent job at existing under the radar of his peers, both by choice and by general disinterest in him as a person by others.

If he didn't sign, he could bet that he would suddenly be on people's radar. Held up as some kind of hero by the rebel students, maybe, but definitely ostracized by the royal students.

Varian shouldn't be letting all of those things get to him. He knew that. He didn't want to sign. He wanted his own future, one full of alchemy and freedom. But still, the more he considered what might happen after he didn't sign, the more he thought...

"Varian! I found you!" Yong came running towards him, smiling wide, catching him in a bone crushing hug.

The boy pulled away, shouting over his shoulder. "Dad, you've gotta keep up!"

A man emerged from the crowd, gasping for air. "Well, that's a little hard when you've gotta say 'Sorry!' for all the straw you drop on their fancy clothes, you know?"

Varian's eyes widened. "Scarecrow?!"

The Scarecrow, Yong's father, laughed, standing up straight. "Yes, yes. That's me. You must be Dorothy's son! Nice to finally meet you." He took the freckled student's hand and shook it with vigor, the motion causing more straw to drop from his arm onto the ground.

"It's, uh, nice to meet you," Varian said, a little frazzled.

"Mom's back in Oz though," Yong said. "She said to say hi."

The Scarecrow sighed. "She had a big lecture to give at the OU."

Varian blubbered for a moment, staring at the Scarecrow, then at Yong. "Your mom is a professor at Oz University?"

"She's the dean."

"Where'd you think he got all those brains of his from? Certainly not me!" The Scarecrow laughed.

Seeing the two of them standing next to each other, Varian realized how similarly they were dressed today. Both were wearing all clashing colors. Fitting for a future scarecrow. The brighter the outfit, the scarier to the crows. If that wasn't enough, they also both wore straw hats.

Yong realized Varian was looking at his hat. "Do you like it? It's made of straw, cause," he laughed, joyful as ever. "You know."

Varian chuckled nervously, unsure if a straw hat was weird for a future Scarecrow to be wearing. Well, who was he to judge? To be honest, it was always pretty nice to see the boy so excited about his destiny, even if this was not yet his year to sign the Storybook.

It silently hit Varian then that if he didn't sign, Yong wouldn't exactly have a story to look forward to. Even if none of them went poof, how could the story happen without Dorothy? He willed himself not to dwell on the thought (not that he had much choice in the matter).

"I didn't know you were going to be here," Varian addressed the Scarecrow. "Yong isn't going to sign this year."

“Oh I know that,” the Scarecrow made a sweeping motion with his arm, before locking his son in a headlock and ruffling his hair. Yong giggled. The Scarecrow continued talking. “But, any excuse to visit my son while he studies here is always a good one.”

Yong, still giggling, broke free of his father’s grip. A bit of straw fell out of his arm onto the ground. The two of them laughed.

“And hey,” the Scarecrow gestured to Varian. “I wasn’t going to miss Dorothy’s son getting to walk across that stage. I’m sure she would’ve been very proud. I hope you know that.”

Varian swallowed. “Yeah, I know.”

The Scarecrow, still smiling, got a far off look in his eye. “We all had to come to Ever After to do this, even though we went to school in Oz. I remember, that was the first time I actually met your mother. She attended that year’s Legacy Day, even though she’d already signed a few years before us. She had such a fascination with the event, and the Storybook itself,” the Scarecrow laughed. “Always analyzing things. That was Ulla.”

Quirin, finally contributing to the conversation, coughed. “Yes, well, I can assure you she grew out of that eventually.”

Varian wondered if anyone else noticed the hint of sadness in his father’s tone.

The Scarecrow frowned. “I suppose we all do. Eventually.” He then waved to Varian. “Good luck up there, young man. We’ll be watching.”

Yong waved with him as they walked away.

His mind betrayed him once more, as Varian became stuck on the knowledge that if he didn’t sign, he wouldn’t just be stopping his own destiny, but most likely stopping Yong’s too. The boy was so similar to Varian’s younger self in so many ways: their love of science, their tendency towards disaster, but not their opinions of their destinies. Yong loved his destiny, even with the strangeness it brought with it (like one day being cursed to be made of straw). Varian didn’t love his own.

Varian wished he understood. He wished he felt the same about his own fate. It looked easier that way.

It occurred to Varian, not for the first time, how easy signing was. How everything, from the school to the world at large encouraged it; was *built* on destiny. Ever After’s own ruler, Snow White, was there because of destiny. It was as much a part of their world as the words they spoke, their air they breathed.

Varian hated that.

Looking around at students and parents alike, Varian saw many different destinies around. Some good. Some not.

A voice that wasn’t his own entered his mind. *Here Varian is worrying about signing to his destiny, one where he ends up in a cozy little farm with his family, safe and secure for the rest of his life, and he doesn’t even want it.*

Now, where had he heard that sentiment before?

Oh, right.

Varian wondered where Hugo was. He hadn't seen him since yesterday. By the time Varian came back from the cafe and the library, the blond was asleep. This morning, he was gone before Varian even woke up, then he got wrapped up in dealing with his family for the day.

Wherever he was, Varian was sure he was having the time of his life. Gliding on air, grinning like an idiot.

Actually, he kinda wanted to see that.

As if the universe heard him, Varian saw an approaching, familiar face, with blond hair and green eyes behind a pair of glasses.

Face to face at last, the roommates stared at each other.

Before either roommate could get a word out, the adults spoke.

"Donella," Quirin said, not sounding pleased or displeased to see her.

"Quirin," Donella held her head high. Her tone was almost identical to his.

"I didn't realize my son's roommate was *your* son," Quirin said simply, not malicious, just honest.

"That's unsurprising. Still dense as ever," Donella shot back.

As the parents had their friendly conversation, Hugo finally caught a glimpse of his roommate for the first time all day.

Varian wasn't wearing his goggles. He had his hair tucked back, hiding that strange blue streak of his. As for the rest of his outfit, he was wearing a brown suit, including a formal jacket with a pale blue shirt underneath. The whole outfit could have easily passed for any old generic destiny, had it not been for the bright red oxfords Varian wore on his feet.

In some ways, it surprised Hugo. From how brightly Varian usually dressed, thanks to the destiny dress code, he assumed his Legacy Day outfit would reflect that. Then again, he figured it was just as reasonable for him to dress like Dorothy would *before* her story. Although, not much was happening to her during that time.

Hugo was snapped out of his trace when he caught Varian looking him up and down.

"Nice cape. Looks comfortable," he smiled, smug. "Your highness."

There he is. "Thanks," Hugo put a hand on his hip. "Farm boy."

Their words were soft, despite themselves.

Then, Varian stepped closer. He unrolled the end of one of his jacket sleeves, revealing writing on the inside. NaCl, S, and Hg.

Nitrogen Chloride, Sulfur, and Mercury. The three main elements of alchemy. Hugo thought. A trick up his sleeve.

Varian certainly looked pleased with himself. “You can take the farm boy out of the alchemy,” he whispered. “But you can’t take the alchemy out of the farm boy.”

Hugo chuckled.

Donella’s gaze moved to the two of them. Hugo was aware of it immediately, feeling her eyes like they were laser pointers. Varian only noticed when she finally spoke. “So, this is Ulla’s son.”

Varian stood a little straighter. “You and my mother were friends, right?” It was obvious in his demeanor that he had many questions for her.

Hugo recalled the carving they found together in the library basement/labyrinth.

Ulla & Donella were here

Donella let out a small noise. Almost like a laugh. But her mouth did not open, so it came out more like a hum. “Once upon a time, I suppose.”

Quirin said reluctantly, addressing his son. “She used to visit the farm, and your mother, when you were little.”

“Really?” Varian stuttered. “Why didn’t she ever mention she knew *the* Sorcerer?”

Quirin glanced at Don. The gray haired woman stayed quiet. An unfinished silence fell over them all.

“Well,” Donella turned to go. “This was nice.”

“If you say so,” Quirin said.

Then, an chim was heard, indicating everyone should head to their seats.

A flash of terror passed Varian’s face.

Quirin, and Varian’s other relatives, guided his son away. “I’ll walk you to the student seats. Let’s go.”

“So, that was the infamous Donella?” one of the freckled student’s relatives asked. Hugo didn’t hear anything from their conversation past that point.

The look on Varian’s face stuck in Hugo’s mind, even as Varian faded into the moving crowd. Now or never, farm boy.

Hugo tried to remind himself that his roommate would learn to live without alchemy (and the world would go on without Varian as an alchemist). So what if he would leave after today? Hugo would be fine. They would both be fine. Apart and fine.

Just before Hugo went to sit down, Donella grabbed his shoulder. She gave away no indication of emotion in her face, or in her voice when she spoke. “Only the best. No exceptions.”

Hugo wasn't about to let her down. Today, all his hard work would pay off.

Soon, everyone was in their seats.

Headmaster Grimm appeared on stage, behind at the podium holding Storybook of the Legends. "Welcome everyone!" His voice echoed through the microphone attached to the podium. "I am happy to see you all for this auspicious day. Today, we celebrate the stories, tales, and legacies that came before us, by continuing them with the next generation. All of you are a credit to your predecessors. The Storybook of Legends awaits *all* of your signatures today."

Real subtle. Hugo thought. As entertaining as it was to watch Headmaster Grimm silently demand that the rebel student sign the book, there was only so much of his voice he could stand.

Eventually, after more agonizing, pointless speech-giving, Grimm announced the first student who would be signing and stepped to the back of the stage.

With that, the ceremony began.

The listed order of students signing was random. It served as a way of trying to show that no story was more important than any other, in the eyes of the school. In the eyes of public opinion, there were clear favorites. Sometimes, the cheers were thunderous, other times simply polite. Through it all, student after student, no one refused to sign yet.

Hugo zoned out for most of the ceremony. There's only so much of watching other people get their destinies that he can bring himself to care about.

He did pay some attention when Nuru walked on stage.

"I am Nuru Star, daughter of the Little Star, and I am ready to pledge my destiny."

Nuru took her key, unlocked the book, and watched as the pages turned on their own, showing her, and only her, the future she had in store. Not simply her story, but her story with *her* in it. At last, above the book, a mirror appeared, showing the ending of her tale. Her happily ever after, if she was fortunate enough to have one. Her face practically twinkled with joy.

Then the mirror transformed to a feather pen. She took it and signed.

The crowds applauded. She left the stage. Instead of returning to her seat, Hugo watched her make a beeline for the parents section, bouncing with excitement.

Hugo rolled his eyes. He would *not* be doing that, thank you very much.

All his attention was brought back to the ceremony when he heard Grimm say the next name.

"Up next, Varian Gale."

How does a son of Dorothy go about refusing to sign the Storybook of Legends?

Does he start by saying, "I am not leaving this room," in the morning?

That might have been a good idea.

But then he does leave the room.

Does he suffocate in the re-adjusted clothes of a predecessor. Clothes with some remnant from a previous predecessor, and the previous previous, and so on and so forward. Does he think about burning the outfit? About pretending it was an accident. Maybe he wouldn't be allowed on stage if all he had to wear was casual clothes!

That might have been a good idea.

But he doesn't even set a match.

Does he run and run away from the ceremony, away from outdoor seating arrangements, away from the marble stage that many have stood, and will stand, atop? Despite the lack of athletic aptitude, he can run far.

That might have been a good idea.

But his steps stay with his family. Within sight of the stage.

Does he talk to their allies? To his friends? To his like-minded Rebels and build his own courage in his heart? Scare away his cowardice?

That might have been a good idea.

But no. Instead, he would walk around, avoiding his Rebel friends who were counting on him. Believing in him, and his supposed *courage*.

Does he refuse to take his seat amongst others who are here to sign away their lives to something much bigger than themselves?

No, he doesn't. He sat and listened through ringing ears, and waited.

Does he hear his name and refuse to stand up? Refuse to make his way to the old, steep, stone steps?

He couldn't. His shoes, ruby-like and heavy, moved.

Step after step, these thoughts appeared of all the ways before now that he could have avoided being here. The idea of refusing to leave the room, burning the attire, talking to his friends, and running away.

But now, he was standing on the stage, facing a crowd of students in the front, and families in the back. All visible, thanks to the blaring lights of the floating mirrors, broadcasting the current signees face and words so that everyone can hear. It was his turn.

"My name is Varian Gale, son of Dorothy Gale, and I am ready to pledge my destiny."

Varian's key appeared. It was mostly silver, with teeth like a farmer's pitchfork. In the center of its circular bow was a ruby. Very unlike Varian. But so like Dorothy. He let it fall into his hand, startled by its weight. It was light. Going through the motions, he unlocked the book.

Varian watched the pages flip past, allowing him to see into his destined future. Varian saw himself back home, an unhappy and listless farmer, desperate for something other than the life he had. A

character meant to learn a lesson.

He saw a twister, and a yellow brick road, and shoes made from rubies (he was relieved to see that they wouldn't be heels. Just formal flat oxfords, from the looks of it. How his mother managed to walk all the way to Oz's capital in heels would always amaze him).

He sees his future trio of companions. In the picture, they walked together like they'd known each other for years. Today, they were strangers to him, except for Yong. In the picture, the future Scarecrow was looking at Varian like he was heroic and good. Maybe this Varian would be. He saw himself facing off hookey wizards, cryptic good witches, and all-too-real wicked witches. Beat by beat, he watched his story play out.

And then a mirror formed out of thin air, just above the book, in front of Varian. He, and he alone, was given a glimpse into his happily ever after. He saw himself back where he started; back home, and there to stay. Lesson learned – there's no place like home. In the image, he was holding Ruddiger in his arms, surrounded by his family. Ulla's absence from the picture was so obvious, it was like she'd been physically removed from it.

In a way, she had.

In the middle of it all was Varian himself. His future self. He was smiling. He looked happy.

Varian wondered how easy it would be to refuse to sign if Ulla was still here. Maybe she would have told him to go for it, the risk be damned. If she had, Varian would have rebelled in a heartbeat, because if she were here then he would never have known what it felt like to see someone you love disappear.

But she wasn't here, and he did know.

Not for the first time, and Varian hated himself for this, he resented Ulla for leaving. He understood, better than anyone alive possible could have, why she did it. She was just like him in so many ways. But he still didn't know what the final shove was. What it took to leave behind her son, her family.

Varian needed that shove. He wanted that shove.

But now, standing on that stage and staring at his future, Varian was struck with the similarities of their choices. Would Varian not be more wicked to refuse? Ulla's story was already over. She only risked herself when she left. Varian would be risking himself and everyone in his story. Varian was no stranger to stupid mistakes. Years of secretly studying science and being alone with his alchemy had left him accustomed to being bold in the dark. Being brave only around those who accepted him as he was. But around others? His courage would only take him so far.

His destiny didn't require courage, or hard work, or ~~alchemy~~. All it required was the signing of his name.

Then the mirror transformed to a feather pen. Varian took it in his hand. It was warm. Many hands had held this before him. Had they felt the same way he did? Had they known the risk? Maybe it didn't matter whether they did or didn't ponder their choice in the matter. Every one of them made the same choice.

Varian's eyes searched the crowd for a familiar face; any face at all. He tried to find Rapunzel, Cass, Eugene, Lance, Nuru, Yong, hell, even Hugo. But through the sea of faces, his eyes landed on his family. A cold winter wind blew through his mind. He suddenly feared if he looked away from them, they would disappear.

His mind summoned the image of his future self, of his Happily-Ever-After. A thought came to Varian so quickly and so easily that it nearly left him breathless: he was probably happy because his family was proud of him, at last.

For a crucial instant, that sounded more wonderful than anything else in the world.

Varian moved his hand.

How does a son of Dorothy go about not signing the Storybook of Legends? The answer was there somewhere, over the rainbow, in the dotting of the "i" in his name, and the scratch of a feather pen on paper.

Too bad he couldn't find it.

There was applause, and congratulations, and a quiet command to "please return to your seat, young man."

Dazed, Varian walked down the stage steps.

Hugo watched Varian walk off the stage.

The freckled young man looked sick. He sat down, a few seats down from the blond, silent. Hugo stared at him from the corner of his eye. He should feel good about this. He's safe, and so is his family, his future, his home. He'd be headed there tomorrow. For good. Hugo's heart twisted.

Right on cue, the Headmaster's voice boomed. "Next we have, Apple White."

Apple White walked onto the stage with a skip in her step, waltzing with the air. Hugo repressed a gag.

Hugo's turn was only two students away.

Luckily, Apple White was mercifully quick to sign. She practically sprinted through the whole process. It was like the book knew she was a done deal. Maybe it did. Hugo wondered if anyone had ever actually studied that dusty old thing. He decided to make a point to ask Don that question later.

Then Apple walked away from the podium, but not off the stage. She seemed to want to stay to see the next person sign up close. Hugo wondered why?

It soon became clear why. The key to her happily ever after was up next.

"And next: Raven Queen."

Despite his daze, Varian was aware of how silent the crowd became when Raven walked on stage. Eerily so in contrast to when Apple was there.

Right. She was destined to be evil. *Hard to cheer for that.* He thought. She didn't look quite so evil though. A strange feat to achieve, in her current attire. She was dressed to the brim with gloomy, sharp attire. Like an Evil Queen would. Although, she looked extremely uncomfortable.

Varian knew the emotion. All he wanted now was for this day to be over. Once he was out of these clothes, the better. He was sure she felt a similar hope.

When Raven reached the podium, she took a long, deep breath.

"I am Raven Queen, daughter of the Evil Queen, and I pledge—" she faltered. "Um, I—"

Then, without warning, Raven's key appeared in front of her, falling into her hand. She pushed it into the lock with an echoing click. As the cover opened and the pages turned, Raven's expression grew sad, hopeless even. It reminded Varian of himself, although he could guess who would have the worst end to their tale.

As he watched, Varian's brain began to emerge from its daze. The weight of what he'd just done began to set in.

Hugo stopped paying attention as Raven's mirror appeared. He looked down the row of seats. His roommate still sat, still as stone, vision unfocused and on the ground. Utterly...

Stop it. Hugo thought to himself. *He will be fine.*

With the end in sight of Raven's turn at the podium, the blond stood and made his way to the stage steps, wanting to be ready. After her, he was going to sign. With each step he took, it truly hit him. He was going to sign. He was going to sign.

At the bottom of the stage steps, he went through his mental checklist. All he had to do was keep his balance, put on a smile, and speak clearly. Easy peasy.

Hugo could face anything that came after that.

He felt Olivia rustle around his shirt pocket, before poking her head out. Hugo liked to think that that was her way of saying good luck. He knew that he was probably right in that assessment anyway, no wishful thinking required.

A giddiness filled Hugo. He was going to sign.

Fucking FINALLY.

With each passing second, regret seeped into Varian's heart.

It was done. He signed.

He felt so dizzy. He was so close to collapsing into himself like a house of cards. He'd always had big emotions, big outbursts, big joys. He feared this would be the mother of all breakdowns.

Was this what it would be like forever? Was this the book? No, no it couldn't be. But then, that meant this was just *him*. Maybe it would have been better if it was the book causing this feeling (or lack thereof). But what the fuck did he even know about the Storybook? What did anyone know about it? A whole library, one of the largest in the kingdom, and not a single book told him what the Storybook's full powers were, or how to stop them.

No. No, this wasn't the book. This really was just his mind processing what *he* did.

Him.

The next Dorothy.

Okay, he might be feeling sick.

Varian stood, shuffling his way through the row of seats. He needed to go inside. He needed to find a bathroom. Somewhere quiet. Anywhere quiet.

A little voice in his head began to fret. What if some disastrous accident occurred? What if there was a freak thunderstorm that rained them all out?

To be so close to everything he had ever wanted terrified Hugo. He knew the world was unfair. If it was going to rip it all away at any time, this would probably be it.

He shooed the thoughts away.

Hugo wondered where Don was in the crowd of parents. He hoped he would see her while he was up there. He wondered who else was looking at him now. By the stage, with its blinding lights, even as he stood to the side it was hard to tell what was happening in the audience.

It was suddenly very quiet. Too quiet.

Raven Queen wasn't speaking.

Hugo looked back at Raven. She looked frozen. Her hand still reaching out for the feather pen, but moved no closer to it than she already was. Her eyes began to dart down to the page, then back up, again and again. The whole atmosphere resembled a ticking time bomb.

Finally, a determined expression exploded on Raven's face. She put both her hands on the podium harshly, looked out into the crowd, and yelled.

"I am Raven Queen, and I'm going to write my own destiny!" Raven grabbed the edge of the Storybook of Legends. "My Happily Ever After starts now." Then she slammed the book shut. A shock wave of her magic shattered the massive mirrors around her. Their glass fell like rain.

Everyone stared.

For a moment, all were silent.

The first voice to be heard was Madeline Hatter's, as she cheered without restraint for her friend. Then the crowd exploded with noise. Half cheers and half boos. Half supportive and half outraged. All thunderously loud. Headmaster Grimm ran off the stage, attempting to calm the crowd down from the ground.

Varian was still standing in the arch of the wide doors back into the school. He stared up at the stage. Even from this distance, he could see Raven and Apple up there clear as day. Raven and Apple. Raven. Raven.

Raven didn't disappear.

"Oh. Okay."

What a relief it must be to his friends. Someone didn't sign, and didn't disappear. They would probably do the same now.

At first, Hugo did nothing. Not a single sound left him.

Hugo stared at the podium, terrified that if he stared into the crowd he would see Donella. He could only imagine what she was thinking. What she would *do* after this.

Then Hugo laughed.

This is a joke, right? His mind was buzzing. Not the fun type of buzzing, like when he fixed a tiny gear in Olivia's leg, or figured out a quieter way into a locked room, or a better chemical solution than his roommate.

This was like a million stinging insects. Buzzing. Stinging.

That didn't just happen, right?

Hugo was very good at not panicking. Now, though, that skill abandoned him. The fragile stack of cards that was his life, based on what little he could trust to be true, was predicated on the Storybook being unimpeachable. His future happiness depended on that (despite what others like Goggles thought). And yet here it was. Impeached.

What would this mean for him? Because there Raven was standing there, definitely not disappearing. Did the book not care that she didn't sign? Did destiny not need a successor?

Did it need Hugo?

His head offered no coherent thoughts. Only radio silence. Hugo felt cheated. He felt angry.

All of a sudden, from the stage, a blast of magic shot in every direction. Then everything froze.

Varian saw it coming.

Out of breath from laughing and crying and something in between, Varian still saw that blast of magic coming his way. He threw himself behind the door into the school.

Woosh.

There, sitting just out of sight of the ceremony area, Varian's mind moved a mile a minute.

Magic. That was magic. Raven Queen's magic. The future Evil Queen. Only, I guess, not anymore. Holy shit she didn't sign. Holy shit did that blast hit everyone? Is everyone okay? Is Dad okay? Aunt Adira? Uncle Hector? My friends. I have to find them after this. Tell them I'm sorry I signed. They'll understand. They have to understand. Hugo— I guess he won't be on my case about wanting to rebel anymore. I hope he's okay. I hope everyone is okay.

It wasn't until he saw Apple White, of all people, run by crying that he dared to walk out into the open.

The venue for Legacy Day looked untouched. The stage (despite the broken mirrors), still stood with its marble and its green vines. The lights shown. The seating arrangements were orderly. All seemed right. With one major difference. Everyone in the audience was completely frozen. Each of them outlined by a thick layer of shimmering purple glow.

Varian went running to find his family. He found them in the section where the rest of the adults, parents, and guardians were sitting. It wasn't as hard as he thought it would be. His father was already standing. Varian wondered if he was trying to flee the blast of magic. Or if he was already standing before that, ready to go find his son. Varian wanted to believe it was the latter. It wouldn't be surprising from his family. They wanted him to sign so he would be safe. They weren't about to let some magic blast hurt him.

Well, he was safe now. Not frozen, and tied to his destiny.

If he'd brought his supplies with him, Varian would have tried to undo whatever this spell was then and there. Unfortunately, all he had was the little sewn letters inside his sleeve. Those didn't do much more than provide moral support.

To figure this out, he would need to find the source.

Varian wandered closer to the stage, seeing that on it stood two figures, one of them appeared to be talking to the sky. It was then that he recognized them. One of them recognized him too.

The sound of a single cheer echoed from the stage. Madeline Hatter, standing beside her beloved friend Raven, jumped in excitement. "Look, Raven, you didn't freeze everyone! Hello over there!" Maddie waved frantically to the freckled student.

"Oh," Raven was clearly relieved. "That's good. Less unfreezing to do."

As he made his way up them, Varian found himself too distracted by the sheer magnitude of the spell he was witnessing the results of to let the stage scare him again (not that there was anything else it could do to ruin his life, at this point).

"Okay, so, first off, this," Raven gestured to the crowd. "This was an accident."

She'd only been able to unfreeze two people thus far (Apple and Maddie) but was hoping to find a way to unfreeze everyone at once, so that she didn't have to go through hundreds individually.

Varian tried to listen as Raven began to explain what kind of spell she'd cast. Looking out at the crowd, every face wore a different expression. Generally, though, they could each be categorized into two kinds of reactions to whatever had happened right before: approval and disapproval.

This split lined up almost perfectly between the Royal and Rebel students.

Well, that was to be expected.

For Varian, this was becoming a night of delayed understanding.

"You didn't sign," Varian said, still trying to make what he saw feel real.

Raven blinked, then let out a breath, smiling slightly. "I didn't," she sighed, still reeling from her choice. "I actually didn't."

"And you're still here," Varian said.

"I know!" She said, still in shock herself.

Varian kept staring at the crowd with her. "Well how about that?" *I would have been fine.*

What bittersweet vindication.

"Fiddlesticks friend," Maddie tilted her head. "You look like you're getting paler than a winter teacup."

Raven nodded in agreement. "Go sit down. I'll figure out how to fix this," she gestured to the frozen crowd.

Varian made his way to the stage steps, legs about to collapse beneath him.

There, he saw a familiar, frozen figure at the bottom. Varian released a breath he didn't know he was holding. All his strife left him, as though the sight of his daily nuisance canceled out the existential one.

He sprinted back to the raven haired girl. "You said you unfroze individuals, right?" Raven nodded. Varian continued. "I need you to unfreeze someone else."

Raven glided over, looking down the steps. "Him?"

Varian nodded. "Him."

"Don't you two hate each other?" Maddie asked.

Answering that would take too much time. "Please just unfreeze him."

Hugo blinked. When he opened his eyes, all the noise stopped, and all the people weren't moving. It was like he'd blacked out.

Three people were staring down at him from the top of the stage steps, Raven Queen, Maddie Hatter, and Goggles. They all looked more than a little concerned. Hugo took a deep breath. “What the fuck?” he said, immediately. He blinked up at the group who, from his point of view, just kind of appeared out of nowhere. “What the fuck?” Then, the last thing he remembered returned to his mind. He looked around at the frozen crowd; the halted ceremony. “What the fuck?!”

“Hello to you too, your highness,” Varian said, unreasonably happy to hear his voice, even when he was freaking out.

Hugo’s hand flew up to his shirt pocket. He patted it gently (well, as gently as he could in his panic). Olivia popped out, shaking off her own little cloud of purple dust, but otherwise none the worse for wear.

Hugo took another deep breath, a little calmer. A calm before the storm, so to speak. He stormed up the stage steps towards the trio.

Varian tried to slow him down. “Take it easy. A spell like that can be hard to shake—”

Hugo shoved past him, heading straight for Raven. “You didn’t sign.”

“No, I didn’t,” Raven, stood by the Storybook once more. She cocked her head to the side. “What about it?”

Hugo stared at her, indigent. “Then you froze me!”

“I froze everyone,” Raven clarified, embarrassed but not backing down. “It wasn’t personal. None of it was.”

“Yeah, well it is *personally* affecting me!” Hugo huffed.

Maddie laughed. “Well that’s just silly. You aren’t the one who didn’t sign.”

“Besides,” Raven emphasized. “If you haven’t noticed, I’m still here. I’m not gonna disappear.”

“How do you know that?” Hugo asked, still reeling from all he had just witnessed. “There’s no rules for this. Someone didn’t sign. Someone important.” The Sorcerer’s son stood there, shaking with dread and fury. “No, no. They’ll send us all back to our dorms until someone gets you,” he pointed to Raven. “Back in line.”

Raven threw her hands up in the air. “I don’t need this kind of talk from you, okay? Apple already gave me the whole spiel,” her voice rose.

“I am not Apple White,” Hugo yelled back. “I’m not some royal prick. I’m just trying to get to the finish line here, and not appreciating people who try to get in the way of that—”

Maddie was not even trying to get them to stop. She was looking up at the sky again. “The Narrators are being loud too.”

Voices overlapped with one another, becoming completely unintelligible, but neither student was willing to back down.

A fourth voice broke through, shattering the others into silence.

“Oh my god,” Varian interrupted. “Both of you stop it!”

Hugo whipped his head around. He stared at his roommate. His shitty, overdramatic, competitive, self-pitying, constantly thinking of others, roommate. Who didn’t even want to sign, and had. Meanwhile, Hugo still hadn’t.

It wasn’t fair.

As far as the blond was concerned, his roommate was not exempt from his outrage.

“Don’t act like you have anything of worth to say in this little discussion. You already got to sign. Enjoy your personal hell of a safe home, a not-even-that-bad overprotective family, and not being forced to work for the rest of your life!” Hugo snapped at him. “So why don’t you just fuck off, Dorothy?”

Hugo took a breath. Then another. He watched as Varian looked like he had stopped breathing all together. He watched as Varian stood there, blank expression.

Without a word, Varian turned heel and walked away.

And Hugo watched.

That irrational fury in him began to subside. Like a cooled chemical substance, it was replaced with something different from its original form. Instead of fury, outrage, irrational terror, what sat at the bottom of Hugo’s heart was regret.

“The Narrators are saying you should go talk to him,” Maddie said, quietly, which was a surprising volume for her. “Or at least go sit down.” Hugo raised an eyebrow at her. Raven ushered her away.

Before his feet could move (in what direction, he wasn’t sure yet), gaze returned to the podium the book was sitting on.

An idea formed.

He could sign right now.

It would be easy. How had he not already thought of it?

The more he thought it over, the more it made sense. With everyone frozen in a sleep-like state, no one would be able to see if the book rejected him.

It would be so easy.

Near the podium, Hugo heard the pair of young women talk to one another.

“The Narrators are saying things about you too,” Maddie pouted at Raven. “You need to stop listening to worry warts. There’s going to be more of those now that you didn’t sign.”

“Right. The *Narrator*, ” clear in her tone, Raven didn’t fully believe her. Raven glanced at the crowd, then sighed. “You’re right, you’re right.”

“I know,” Maddie laughed, quickly throwing herself at her friend, embracing her.

Even from a distance, Hugo felt a twinge green looking at them. He imagined what being friends with someone and getting along that easily must feel like.

Yeah, he didn't know anything about that.

The closest thing he had to a friend was currently having twelve different types of existential crises. Hugo didn't know how to help him with that. He didn't know what to do.

Letting himself get distracted by him wasn't an option.

Signing. That's what he should be doing. Do it now while everyone's asleep. Afterwards, after it accepted him, he could always tell people he got impatient waiting for them to be unfrozen. If the book rejected him, at least he'd be spared the humiliation of it happening in public.

Yes, it would be easier this way.

He walked closer to the podium; closer to the edge of the stage. Was it taller all of the sudden? No, no that wasn't possible, Hugo knew that. But then, why did it feel so dizzying? He was afraid he would lose his balance if he got too close to it. Looking at the Storybook itself had the same effect.

This was it. He was going to find out if the book would accept him or not. Hugo knew it would. He believed it would. But still...

For the first time all day, Hugo hesitated.

Then, from where he stood, he heard a new sound, a snuffle, in a familiar voice.

Varian.

"You may not have gotten your fate like everyone else, but you're still your mom's son. Why would being adopted change anything?" Hugo remembered Varian saying, so honest it almost scared him. *"Magic will know the truth. Simple as that."*

Hugo's urgency, his terror, left him.

The Storybook *would* accept him. He'd worked too hard to panic now, and act like a cornered rat. Same as with thieving, one should never act out of desperation and irrational fear, even in dire circumstances.

Plus, if no one saw him sign, he would lose the satisfaction of seeing all those royals look *up* at him, for a change. Even if he and Don were the only ones who knew his past, and the depths of his hatred for these royalty types, it would be worth every bitter minute of his destitute childhood.

Maybe that goth girl was right. Grimm would get the ceremony back on the rails soon enough.

If Hugo was good at anything, it was being patient. He'd waited his whole life for this. He could wait a little longer.

Speaking of actions out of irrational fury and fear, Hugo called Varian 'Dorothy'.

The distant snuffles grew more pitiful. Guess Goggles wasn't handling those twelve crises very well. Not surprising.

Hugo stared down at Olivia, poking out of his pocket again.

“I have to do everything, don’t I?”

Well, the Storybook would still be there after he dealt with this little situation.

Varian kept staring at the frozen crowd.

They didn’t look so scary anymore, frozen like they were. Eerie, and unsettling, but not scary. He knew his friends were among them. Varian tried not to think about them. How would they react when they saw him again? Their cowardly friend who let them down.

He wondered if they could hear him after they were frozen. He doubted it; he knew spells of this kind well enough to know they were in a sleep-like state. Hugo’s reaction to being unfrozen was proof of that. When they did get unfrozen, it would be like they just woke up from an unplanned, dreamless sleep. Like blinking.

Varian wondered if he was under a similar spell. He was not so naive to assume this had all been a dream, but couldn’t it be magic? Couldn’t this all be some accidental alchemical solution that blew up in his face, and made him hallucinate? Why not? It would explain the sting in his eyes. Maybe if he blinked a few more times, he would snap out of it. He would be back in his dorm, probably laying on the floor, his mother’s goggles on his head. Hugo would be there, ready to make fun of him.

“Goggles?”

Speak of the devil.

Varian rubbed his face. “What?”

“I just,” Hugo tried to look him in the eye. Varian could tell he wasn’t doing a great job at that. The blond adjusted his glasses. “This funk you’re in isn’t a good look on you. So, you signed. Big deal,” the blond said, looking very determined to believe that as he said it. “You gonna mope and cry about it forever?”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead yet,” Varian dared to joke.

Hugo dared to chuckle, ignoring Varian’s glare as he did. “I mean it. I don’t like you like this,” the taller student muttered.

“You don’t like me at all.”

“Well, somehow, this is even worse,” Hugo still wouldn’t look him in the eye. But, he sat next to him on the steps.

“If calling me ‘Dorothy’ replaces ‘farm boy’, I will be immensely disappointed,” Varian said like a warning.

Hugo scoffed. “Relax. It doesn’t quite roll off the tongue the same way.”

If the joke was meant to make Varian feel better, it mostly failed.

Varian ran a hand through his black hair. “I’ve been wasting so much time. I could’ve been trying to figure out if any of this was for real. I mean, clearly it’s iffy at best but— I’m an alchemist! If I could do it all over again, maybe I’d do something different.”

“You mean something reckless,” Hugo said.

“I mean— I mean,” Varian huffed, breath shaking. His voice sobered. “I would’ve been okay.” Varian’s voice sobered. A gasping sound ripped its way out of his throat. He sounded like he was going to cry.

Hugo grimaced and stared at the ground. Minutes passed, and no tears were shown.

“I am so stupid,” Varian muttered.

Hugo blinked. The statement was stupid, but Varian himself? “You’re not—” Hugo’s voice broke. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh,” Varian said, sarcastic. “You’re sorry?”

“Yeah,” Hugo glared at him, before it faded into something softer. “I am.”

A flash of purple caught their attention. Raven’s hands, re-absorbed in magic purple shimmer, were outstretched. Then, she lowered them.

In one big puff, all the purple glow surrounding everyone in the crowd of spectators, students, parents and guardians alike, vanished.

Silence vanished with it.

Voices erupted from the crowd.

Hugo went running from the stage. His head, spinning from the sounds of all those voices after such an enforced silence, told him that the thing to do now was find Donella. She would know what to do. If not, then she would at least act like she did.

But, any words he planned to say died in his throat when he finally found her.

Don was silent. She stood there, completely and utterly stunned. She couldn’t even look at him; just kept staring at the stage, and the podium where the Storybook of Legends still sat, closed.

That scared Hugo more than anything else in the world could.

“Don?” Hugo asked.

“Go back to your dorm.” Her voice was shaking. He was sure he heard it shaking.

Hugo was shaking too.

“Mom?” Hugo asked, quieter. He wasn’t sure she could hear him over the crowd screeching like chickens with their heads cut off. She didn’t respond, but her gray eyes met his green ones. If he

didn't know any better, he would have immediately, without any doubt, thought that she looked afraid. So very afraid.

Like she saw a ghost.

Then, Headmaster Grimm took control of the podium. He all but screamed into the microphone. "All students, please return to your dorms until further notice."

Donella, her eyes still on her future Apprentice, nodded her head to the door. It was time for him to leave.

Hugo took a few steps back, eyes still glued to Don. Then, he shoved his way through the crowd, intent on listening to her instructions. Like he always did. Like he always would.

At the same time as Hugo went running from the stage, so did Varian.

He lost Hugo in the crowd almost immediately. Everyone was back to screaming and booing and cheering and demanding an explanation. Varian was sure he could hear someone vomiting nearby. At least it wasn't *him* doing that.

A hand took hold of his shoulder.

Before he could throw them off of him, he saw who it was. "Dad."

"Son," Quirin's grip on him was iron. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," Varian tried not to shake. "I'm fine."

Quirin's face cracked in relief. He pulled his son into a bone crushing hug.

Varian suddenly felt safe enough that he might finally cry. He was glad his dad was okay too. He didn't know what he'd do if his dad wasn't okay. He didn't want to think about that now, safe in the embrace

The choice he made was to keep him, and so many others, safe. He couldn't hate himself for that, even if in the end it might have meant nothing.

The hug ended too soon. Quirin pulled back.

"Get to your room and start packing. We'll get the rest of your things another day. The sooner we get out of here, the better. You are not disappearing because of some wayward evil queen-to-be."

"Dad—"

"We're leaving tonight. Now go pack."

"Dad!" Varian yelled, not that it made a dent in the sea of noise they were standing in. It felt good though, to get it out. Until he saw his father's eyes.

Quirin's eyes were filled with tears. He quickly rubbed them away.

Varian shook. With rage, with sadness, with something more palpable than it all combined, he didn't know. He'd never seen his father cry. Not even after mom left.

Either way, he nodded, and began to walk off. He pushed his way through the crowd, still shouting, still confused and joyous and furious.

Hugo found Varian packing.

"You're leaving."

Varian nodded, still focused on the task at hand. His dad said they would have someone come pick up most of his things, so he tried to prioritize the important stuff tonight. Absent-mindedly, he wondered where Ruddiger was hiding.

It was then that it hit Hugo that he probably wasn't going to see his roommate again after this. Goggles was really leaving.

Hugo put a hand on the luggage, slamming it shut. He pointed a finger in Varian's face. "No."

Varian blinked. "No?"

"No!" Hugo said, louder. "You don't get to just walk out. Not on the shittiest day either of us have had all year."

"You think I have a choice in the matter?" Varian asked.

Hugo sputtered. "You're a rebel! What does it matter whether you are told you have a choice or not." He watched Varian's expression fall, then shift to something more neutral. The thief had done the same move himself so many times; he could recognize it anywhere, on any face.

"Well," Varian said. "Right now, you're more of a rebel than I am."

...

Wait. He was right.

Varian signed, Hugo didn't (if only because of extraneous circumstances).

All at once, Hugo's face broke into pure delight. Then, he laughed. He laughed so hard and so loud that he nearly fell over where he stood.

"Goggles," he wheezed. "That may be the worst joke I've ever heard," he said, half laughing, half crying. The blond was completely beside himself.

The suddenness of his reaction, coupled with its over-the-top-ness, drew increasingly powerful giggles from Varian, until he too was laughing till his sides hurt. The freckled student actually ended up leaning a hand on roommate, as he threatened to collapse to the ground.

Hugo gripped his arm in turn. Not quite hugging him, but pretty close to that.

“You’re the worst person I’ve ever had the misfortune of meeting,” Varian said, laughter still coming from his throat in painful bursts.

Hugo laughed so hard he hiccuped. “I can’t stand you! You’re a brain virus. A chemical spill. The biggest distraction I’ve had in forever.”

Involuntarily, Varian thought back to the first day he met Hugo, the first day he was in class with him. What an ass. Varian had never felt so determined to one up someone. That drive was still a part of him, even now. “You’re lucky I signed. If I didn’t, you’d only be the second best magical scientific alchemical student in this school by the end of the year.”

Hugo’s eyes fell to Varian’s hair. Without thinking, he ruffled the pushed back mop. “Yeah, if you could even *see* what you were looking at through those bangs, farm boy.” Hugo kept his hand around his hair, near his face. Varian’s blue streak reemerged, free from the day’s styling.

Varian leaned into Hugo more, adjusting his roommate’s glasses, as they had been left slightly crooked on his face. “You’re the one wearing glasses, your highness.”

They laughed again. This time, a little less rapturously.

Varian wanted to stay. When he was with Hugo, his biggest problems were just being better at alchemy. That thrill was better than flying.

Hugo was feeling a similar elation. It came easy, when Varian was around. Even when he was annoying and distracting. All at once, Hugo heard an old voice enter his mind. *Don will be happy. No more roommate to worry about.*

Hugo closed his eyes tight.

Staring at the blond, a thought appeared in Varian’s head, turning his face red. It was a thought so ridiculous that he didn’t even want to name it.

In any case, it snapped Varian out of his joy, that was for sure.

They separated, slowly, neither sure what that was all about. Silence echoed between them. It occurred to them only then to wonder why such obvious physical affection came so naturally. Without hesitation.

Their hands felt like they both had nerve damage. What was this feeling?

Then, Varian jumped, surprised by motion at his foot. Ruddiger stared up at him, head tilted in confusion at his reaction.

Priorities. He needed to pack. Ruddiger was coming with him too.

As he picked up his furry friend, Varian remembered that since he’d signed, guess that technically made Ruddiger his “Toto” now. Isn’t that silly? Varian wanted to cry again. Toto wasn’t as nice a name as Ruddiger.

The raccoon himself protested being picked up, as if he understood that they were leaving for good. He writhed as Varian tried to guide him into the animal carrier.

Hugo spotted Olivia trying to sneak her way into said carrier. He reached down and grabbed her before she could. “You trying to go with Goggles, Liv?” He said quietly, feigning betrayal. “That hurts.”

Somehow, Varian heard him. “Maybe you can bring her out to the farm sometime. Might need to put a tracker on her though, or she’ll get lost in the fields.”

Hugo rolled his eyes, putting Olivia in her charging station and pointing for her to stay put. “Bold of you to assume she doesn’t have a tracker on her already.” He saw Varian grin at him. Hugo retreated into himself. “No, I don’t think I’ll have time to visit. You know me. A Sorcerer’s Apprentice is always working.”

Varian nodded, shrugged off the disappointment that settled in him. Finished packing (what he could take with him tonight at least) he gathered his luggage. He left one hand free to get the most important item from off his desk.

Hugo got to them first. He took Varian’s goggles off the desk.

Varian sighed. “Hugo, give those back.” There was no bite in his tone.

Hugo did not spin the goggles around, nor did he toss them in the air for added insult. He simply held them in his hands. “I don’t know if I should. You won’t dare leave without these.” *Give them back*, a voice in Hugo’s mind insisted. *Let him leave*.

“Trying to get me to stay?” Varian asked, attempting humor. Badly attempting. He sounded serious.

Hugo ignored his question. “You aren’t stupid, by the way.”

Varian was surprised he was still thinking about what he said at the stage. It filled him with a strange warmth. He stepped close to his roommate.

Hugo kept talking, despite himself. “I do not make a habit of liking stupid people,” he said to his friend.

“I thought you said you didn’t like me?” Varian looked smug. He looked like himself again.

Hugo’s heart soared, without his permission, despite himself. “Nevermind, you’re a moron.”

The air felt breathable again. For a moment, both roommates thought they could forget everything that happened today, and what was bound to come after. Right now, they were still just two roommates. Two roommates possessed a talent for forgetting the world around them when they were near each other.

Then that moment was over.

“Son,” Quirin’s voice echoed from outside the door. “Time to go.”

His footsteps diminished as he seemed to go back down the hallway. Varian knew his father well enough to know he was pacing.

“Well,” Varian said. He held out an open palm, waiting for Hugo to give back the goggles. “Bye.”

Hugo held the shorter student's goggles for a bit longer than Varian thought he would. His grip was rigor mortis stiff, even as he placed the headgear in his roommate's grasp. His hand stayed there, in contact with Varian's hand. "Bye."

"Bye," Varian said, still not moving.

"Bye," Hugo repeated.

Varian wasn't sure how long he stood there. Eventually, the voices of his family called his name. He removed his hand, and headed out. Out of habit, he moved to close the door.

He caught one last glimpse of Hugo.

The door never got the chance to shut.

Varian dropped his bags, rushed back through the door, and pointed his finger in his roommate's face. "This is a draw," Varian announced, almost smug. "You don't win by default just cause I'm leaving. Got it?"

Hugo froze. His throat was dry as he spoke. "Whatever you say." One last smirk appeared on his face.

Satisfied, Varian lowered his hand, grabbed his dropped luggage, and went out the door.

As he walked down the hallway, towards his family at the end of the hall, he looked at his phone and saw a number of messages from his friends' group chat. Most were asking if everyone was alright. The last few were calling him out by name, asking where he was, if he was okay.

Asking about him signing.

Varian didn't dare read any more of the texts after that. He didn't want to know what they thought of him after all that. After he let them down, as he was sure they thought he did.

Tomorrow, he decided. Tomorrow, he would look.

For now, he was going home, and that was enough heartache for one day.

Donella stormed down the hall. An old muscle memory guided her to her destination.

Everything in her old school was deathly silent. After the crowds, including her, got unfrozen, everyone was urged to return to their dorms and hotels until this "situation" was sorted out.

A student not signing. A student not signing and *not disappearing*.

Donella grit her teeth. *I will not let my destiny be threatened.*

She practically slammed the door to the Headmaster's office off its hinges, scaring the frazzled old man out of his chair.

"You know as well as I do," Donella marched forward. "That you don't have proof that going 'poof' will happen."

Grimm became deathly pale.

“Right,” Donella continued. “You need proof to get these brats back in line. So, I will ask you this now, and this time you better listen: Let me study the Storybook. First hand. I’ll get you the proof you need.”

The Headmaster’s mouth opened, but no words came.

Donella was out of patience. “Do not make me repeat myself.”

“Still with that tone, I see.” Grimm’s expression twisted to resentment.

“Do not talk down to me, old man. You’re in no position to bargain.”

The Headmaster held his head high. “I can’t let you take the Storybook with you to your lair.”

Don knew where this was headed. “I’m not working at this hellhole of a school. You’ll let me take the Storybook with me if you know what’s good for you.”

“And what is good for you? And your son?” The Headmaster folded his hands. “Her Majesty the White Queen recently told me of a very interesting encounter with your son in the library, as you’re aware. An encounter involving the possession of a hand mirror he should not have had access to. Of course, he wasn’t the one holding it, but you and I both know he was the one stealing it. Don’t we?”

If Don were any less stoney, perhaps she would have froze, or looked upset, or fucking furious. But she didn’t.

The details were agreed upon right then and there.

Leaving the office, heels clacking like hammers on a brass bell, Donella’s mind was pure perpetual motion.

Ulla. Let’s see how much you were right about.

Alone, Donella had work ahead of her.

Chapter End Notes

Wouldn’t it be funny if I ended the story here?

Okay but for real, there is more to come. A plan is in motion that will make all of this ANGST worthwhile, I promise 😭

This chapter ended up being over 13,000 WORDS!!! I hope you enjoyed it! Kudos and comments (even just unintelligible sobbing) are always welcome. (Also, if anyone ever does any fanart, especially of the outfits I described in this chapter, let me know on my tumblr I’d love to see it).

Remember to take care of yourself, get medicine if you're feeling sick (like I did for almost all of October), get some rest, and DRINK SOME WATER!!!

Side note - Another song for this chapter was His Kiss, the Riot from Hometown. Specifically the lyrics: "Every coward seems courageous in the safety of a crowd. Bravery can be contagious when the band is playing loud. Nothing makes a man so bold as a woman's smile and a hand to hold. But all alone his blood runs thin, and doubt comes. Doubt comes in."

The Week After Legacy Day

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of Legacy Day, Varian and Hugo come to terms with their individual situations, and what comes next.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year!!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

The immediate aftermath of Legacy Day was a blur to Hugo. The world around him felt too quiet. His dorm especially.

The day after Legacy Day, Headmaster Grimm called all the students into the Charmitorium for an assembly. Hugo hoped it was to announce that everyone would be signing that day (hell, maybe Raven Queen changed her mind about Rebelling). Instead, the shitty old man said that no one would be signing until further notice. At least, until “Certain students remember the importance of honoring their story.”

It was very clear which student (singular) he was referring to. Ah, good old peer pressure. The whole student body was buzzing from her choice not to sign. Those that wanted to rebel were over the moon about it. Those that wanted to sign were furious. All around, the tension was high; even the Castleteria was full of it. The day after Legacy Day, some kind of food fight broke out there, resulting in hunks of food sticking all over the location.

Hugo wondered how long Raven would hold out before everything got to her. If she was really evil, it wouldn't work on her. She didn't seem so evil though.

Hugo tried to convince himself that he would sign soon. It was easier said than done. For years, he'd built his stability on guarantees, and on the knowledge of how quickly they could be taken away. However, the date of Legacy Day was unchanging. Now, it was anything but. So, he turned to the most constant part of his life. Someone whose word was truer than true, even in a crisis. For once, Hugo called Don, and not the other way around.

“I didn't see you leave.” Hugo tried not to sound disappointed about it. Everything was so hectic, it wasn't really a surprise Don didn't drop by his room to say goodbye.

“You did what I told you. Got back to your room and stayed put,” Donella said bluntly. “That was all you needed to do; that didn't include giving me some half-assed goodbye.”

“Right,” Hugo nodded. “What now?”

Don was silent for a moment. “Now, consider yourself off-duty.”

What.

“What.” Hugo blinked. “You mean from—” *My oh-so legal side jobs of getting whatever Don asks me to steal?*

“What have I told you about obvious questions?”

Hugo should have felt relieved. After all, the plan was that once he was supposed to sign, he was going to be free of those jobs anyway. He didn’t sign, but he was still reaping some of the rewards. Why, then, did this feel like this was a punishment?

“I didn’t sign though,” Hugo said, a little too much terror in his voice. He hoped she couldn’t hear it.

She did.

“Legacy Day changed everything,” Don said. “We’re in uncharted waters now. I won’t have you messing things up because you don’t know how to swim.”

Hugo wilted.

“More importantly,” she continued. “Grimm knows about your last fucked up. During the library job.”

Hugo didn’t move the phone away fast enough to hide the gasp he let out. He tried to make himself speak, come up with an excuse, an apology, anything. But his voice was empty as air.

Don didn’t let him get in a word anyway. “I’ve raised you well, Hugo. It isn’t like you to disappoint me this immensely.”

Hugo stared at the floor. Even when she wasn’t in the room, she was looking down on him. He knew he deserved it. That didn’t make it hurt any less to hear.

The call ended. There were no illusions about Don’s anger when she didn’t even say goodbye.

As the final click echoed in his ear, Hugo let his back fall onto his bed. Hands over his face (under his glasses), he muffled a series frustrated yells.

Mechanical sounds from the floor caught his attention. Hugo glanced down to where Olivia was sitting on the floor with a ball of yarn once used by the raccoon. She used to love stealing it from the fuzzy creature, running around the room with it as she avoided being swiped at. Now, she sat by it, curled up. Hugo pitied her.

Unrelated, Hugo wondered what his former roommate was doing now. Probably setting up some make-shift, at-home lab. The mental image made the blond student smile.

His phone was in arms reach. He could call him.

And say what?

“Hey Goggles! How’s your scary-looking family? How’s being at home going? You know, being at home, the thing you didn’t want to happen to you. Still upset about signing the Storybook of Legends? Anyway, my mom is mad at me for being a bad thief. I’m a thief by the way. You didn’t know that?”

With a groan, Hugo got off of his bed. He plopped himself down at his desk, and opened his class notebooks. The best use of his time right now would be to keep up his grades. If he couldn’t sign yet, and if he couldn’t go any more jobs to make Don have faith in him, then he could at least keep being the best at this.

His destiny was his goal. Nothing would deter him from that. Somehow, he would find a way to make Don trust him again.

Somehow. He held onto that thought tightly. It wasn’t nearly as comforting as: *Just have to make it to Legacy Day.*

Quirin sat himself on the porch of his house, overlooking the farm. The harvest had been good this year. The cold seasons were coming fast, though.

Last night had been a long drive. Ever After High always felt so far away, even by car. Because it *was* far. Well, no use complaining about it. He wouldn’t be going there again. Neither would his son. He wanted his son to understand that. Quirin wanted to talk to him, make sure he understood that this wasn’t done out of malice, but he’d gone straight to his room when they got home, and hadn’t come out since.

Perhaps it was for the best, for now. What could be said that wasn’t already crystal clear? He was staying here, at home. No amount of talking would change that.

The screen door opened. A figure came trudging out.

“Son,” Quirin called out, shaken by his presence. Varian paused in his stride, silently looking back at his father. His father’s brow furrowed. “Where are you off to?”

Varian shrugged. “No where.”

Quirin opened his mouth to reiterate the question. His son beat him to the punch.

“Edge of the field and back; looking for Ruddiger. He ran out of my room last night. I’m guessing he got into the blueberries.”

Quirin knew they were picked clean while Varian was at school. He didn’t feel it was right to tell him that. It was possible the raccoon didn’t know. Instead, he nodded, and watched his son disappear into a distant spot.

One could find a lot of places to wander here. Plenty of fields, stalks, flora, and a large enough red barn that if the wandering went too far, you’d see it and know how to get back. The farm was a good one, but Quirin was probably biased. He’d never understood his son’s need to get out of here. Maybe it came with having a destiny like his. Dorothy; always looking to the horizon. Or maybe it was just what being Ulla’s son was like. She was the same way. Whether that was because she was

a Dorothy or just because she was Ulla, Quirin would never know. To him, the routine the farm held was a heavenly thing.

Which reminded him, the barn needed some repairs.

Maybe it was also time to fix up, or tear down, Ulla's old shed. No one had touched the thing in years. Ulla used to do her sciences there. She even used to joke that if Varian wanted to, he could use it for his little experiments too. *"He'll have to wear goggles though."* She used to say.

There were more routines of the mind these days; had been since Ulla left. A memory here, an unhealing ache there. This was Ulla's home before it was Quirin's, or their son's. Ulla came with the home, and even after she left, pieces of her were never far.

There were many things Quirin would never know about his wife, and many he did know. He'd long accepted that. Today, though, his routine of the mind was leading him to think back to Ulla's disappearance. He'd been thinking about the night she left, and what she said to him the night before. When she told him so many things.

"What about your friend? You mentioned a partner. Who is she? She can do it for you—"

"She's not going to help anymore." The look on his wife's face stopped Quirin from asking what she meant. She sighed. "So, now I need your help."

Then, Ulla spoke clearly and honestly, leaving no room for doubt in her tone. "I'm going to do this, with or without you."

Quirin said nothing. Ulla waited, and he said nothing.

Ulla huffed. "Fine. Without you."

Something about the finality of that statement shook her, Quirin could tell. All he asked of her after that was that she not tell Varian why he was leaving. "If you succeed, then you can tell him when you get back. If not, I don't want him living with squandered hopes."

She didn't object to it. Not with words, at least.

Ulla spent the rest of the night in her shed, her make-shift study. She left the next day.

Quirin took a deep breath. The air was getting colder.

Just as he said he would, Varian only went as far as the brush, and came back soon after, Ruddiger absent from his side.

"Son?"

Varian looked at him, expression devoid of emotion.

"I'm sure he'll turn up. He can't have gone far."

Without a word, Varian went inside.

Quirin sighed. Sometimes it felt as though there was something in his lungs, something he should have said to his son long ago. With every exhale, it itched to be said. But he would not say it. Ulla

hadn't, and neither would he. His son was home. His son was safe.

That was what mattered.

Quirin could live with whatever was left unsaid.

A few days later

Nothing felt real.

When he first saw his childhood home again, all old wood, chipped paint, and memories, a strange sense of déjà vu hit him. Since then, he felt as though his world was fogged by it. Being back where he grew up, before he ever set foot in Ever After High, made Varian's mind keep quietly forgetting about Legacy Day.

But it happened. He signed.

To be honest, he always hoped he'd feel different somehow. For instance, more Dorothy-like. More wistful, less scientific. It never really happened for Mom, but a guy could dream right? They say ignorance is bliss. Why couldn't he give that a shot?

Well, it didn't happen for him either. In the end, he didn't feel much different. Still Varian, now with a shiny, set in stone future. Now all he wanted was to stay in his room and continue to forget about everything. The only problem was his Toto.

From the moment they got back, Ruddiger had been running around the farm to his heart's content. To the blueberries bushes one day, the apple trees the next, the chicken coop another time, so on and so forth, every day. Varian always felt a little bad that he didn't have any wide spaces to explore at school. None as peaceful as the farm, anyway.

Today, unfortunately, Ruddiger seemed to have gotten too hyped about re-exploring the farm. Varian couldn't find him, even though he'd searched most of the farm. Well, at least the searching wasn't so bad. Honestly, it was kind of a nice distraction from everything; and by everything he meant wondering about school, and his friends, and Hugo and Hugo a lot actually.

School could never be confused with his childhood home. The fields were mostly picked clean, but the trees still had autumn leaves on them, rustled constantly by the chilled air. The dirt roads were treaded on from the house to the fences, smelling of rot, that outlined the property. Even the tornado shelter held memories. To Varian, it felt like a nostalgic scavenger hunt, looking for Ruddiger. Once again, it helped him forget his new reality. It got less fun as more time passed and Ruddiger's whereabouts remained a mystery. The future Dorothy didn't worry too much though. The raccoon never stayed out for long, at least not past the usual meal times.

That belief was tested when, even after dinner, Ruddiger wasn't back yet. By then, there was one place Varian didn't search.

So, for the first time in years, Varian went to his mother's study shed.

While Varian's lab stayed in the basement, his mother (when she was still around, and especially after) did all her experiments in the shed that stood by the barn. That way, if anything caught on fire, it would only take down the shed. Not that anything ever did. Varian always figured his mother was just that good at her secret sciences.

As a child, Varian wasn't allowed inside.

"When you can handle yourself in a kitchen, then you can handle a lab." Mom used to say. Which, he quickly realized, was their way of saying there wasn't a chance he was gonna be allowed inside. Although it always felt more like a Dad-rule than Mom-rule, she never agreed with that sentiment. In any case, Dad was the only one allowed to go near the shed, other than her. Aunt Adira and Uncle Hector didn't live with them at the time. It was just them three.

Only once, Varian was tasked with getting his mother from the study shed when dinner was ready. She usually came back just in time, but that night she'd stayed out much later than expected.

His father grumbled that dinner would get cold if she stayed out much longer. He was about to go get her himself when one of the dishes he'd been letting stay on the stove to keep warm got a bit too warm. While Quirin was dealing with the smoke, Varian offered to get Mom.

Quirin had coughed. *"Sure, fine. Go."* Before he could take back the permission, Varian was out the door.

He'd found his mother crying that night. Varian forgot to tell her about dinner. He just went back to the house, deciding that the shed wasn't for him.

It wasn't long after that that she'd left.

Now, Varian stood in front of the shed and knew his mother wouldn't be inside. He knew that.

The door creaked open. Varian winced at the noise, impulsive looking back at the house. Moments passed. More moments passed. No lights appeared in the windows. Varian took a deep breath. He stepped further into the shed, shining the light from his phone around the small, dusty space.

A frantic chirping pulled him from his internalizations. Ruddiger was in the corner, one paw stuck in an old floor board.

"Ruddiger!" Varian kneeled down. "I'm so sorry, bud." Carefully, he removed the paw from the wood, making sure that the cracked floor didn't cause more damage in the process. Despite the paw being a bit scratched up, there were no splinters or blood to be found.

"Have you been here all day?" Varian sighed. Ruddiger chirped indignantly. Varian guessed that was a yes, and slumped, petting his fur to calm him down. "Sorry. You definitely shouldn't have been in here." From what he could see in the low lighting, the shed had not been touched in a long time. Not surprising. "I shouldn't be in here either." Varian, still sitting on the old wood floor, kept petting Ruddiger, less and less with the goal of calming the raccoon down, and more so to calm himself down.

This place felt like a time capsule, despite the cobwebs and creaking. Well, maybe because of the cobwebs and creaking. A space where someone who once filled the same ruby shoes he was destined to inherit took refuge. Could he have a refuge? Could he have that too? Would it ever be enough? His mom used this shed as hers, and it wasn't enough.

To repeat the same actions over and over again and expect different results is the definition of insanity. He tried to remind himself of that, as he stopped petting Ruddiger. His fluffy friend hadn't disappeared today. Neither did Varian.

Whatever he did next with the life he'd signed up for, the life he couldn't hand back (the life he already wanted to hand back), he knew he couldn't do exactly what she did. It wouldn't be enough.

This old shed was just that. An old shed. It held nothing that would help him.

Varian stood to go.

Creaking turned to cracking. Suddenly, his foot was not on the floor, it was through it. Varian grit out a series of swears because, well, OW. *Guess this is what happens when you don't replace old wood.* Varian thought, as he pulled his foot out of the rotting floorboards and...

There was something *in* the floor.

Varian lowered himself, brushing away the stray pieces of wood. Below where the floorboards should have been, there was a notebook. Hefty and old. Remarkably free from insect-caused damage and decay, and smelling like benzaldehyde.

Varian lifted it out of the ground. Before he could open it, he noticed that there was something else in the hidden space: an envelope. Time had faded the white shade of its surface, and the ink that first wrote on it, but that didn't hide what was written on the envelope.

Varian.

Something soft and painful worked its way into Varian's heart, threatening to overflow into his eyes. Delicately, he opened it, finding a folded up sheet of paper inside.

It was blank.

Disappointment bordering on panic struck the freckled young man. *She wouldn't just leave me with nothing. She wouldn't. Well, maybe she would— Would she? No. There's gotta be...*

Varian's eyes glanced back at his phone, the flashlight still on. An idea struck him.

Running on adrenaline and hope, Varian scooped up Ruddiger, the notebook, the letter, and his phone and rushed out of the shed. Once back in the house, he ran to the kitchen. He searched a few drawers before finally finding the box of matches.

He tried lighting one of them, hands shaking. He tried to breathe, he really did. Eventually, trying turned to doing, and his heart felt a little less like a woodpecker and his hands were steady enough not to accidentally start a house fire.

With the little stick of flame in hand, Varian waved it slowly (close but not too close) in front of the letter paper. Brown invisible ink appeared. The ink of the words was as old as his name on the envelope, and part of it was smudged as if they'd once been wet.

Son,

I'm sorry. I'm guessing I'm not home. I probably haven't been home for a long time. Assuming I stuck to my word, I probably didn't even say why I left.

Please don't be mad at your father for saying nothing about what I'm about to tell you. I only told him tonight, and I didn't even tell him everything.

You know I do experiments and research on my own. Before my story, I did so much more of it. I traveled. I researched. But afterwards, well, Dorothy isn't supposed to do all that. I figured that as long as I stayed here on the farm, I could keep doing the research, at least. All would be well. And it was. Plus, I had a research partner with much more freedom. She would send me what she found, and I would draw the conclusions.

Recently, she backed out. I don't know if I can blame her. This isn't some frilly study of the basic elements that I'm conducting. This is borderline illegal stuff. But now, without a research partner, I've made the decision to go out into the world and finish this journey myself. I don't care about the risk anymore. This is about more than just me.

I've made copies of all my notes, and will be leaving them here for you to find. Took me all night, so I really hope the sleep deprivation didn't jumble them into gibberish. The originals, as well as these copies, are in code, so I guess it would gibberish ON TOP OF gibberish. This is a safety precaution, in case someone else finds it all first.

If you're not my son reading this letter, I ask that you kindly stop reading. It's a little late into the letter for me to ask that, but oh well. If you are my son, hello again. Where was I? Right, code.

The code is also there to give you a chance to ignore all of this. I don't want you dragged into this unless you choose to take the leap. You deserve the option. My research is all about finding options, after all. If you want a different path from the one I'm expected to offer you, or even if those around you do and you want to find a way for them, I think you'll find my work helpful.

Sorry about the smudges. I'm trying not to cry onto the paper, I really am trying.

I'm racking my brain right now, trying to remember anything else I should say that my notebook won't get across. All I can think of is this: I love you, son. No matter where I went, or what happened to me, I'm sure I never stopped loving you. Whatever path you go down, I will love you regardless. You're my son after all, you'll be clever no matter what you choose to do.

Good luck,

Mom.

The paper was smudged anew. Varian laughed through his tears.

Like the letter, the entire notebook his mother left him was not plain to see. They weren't invisible, but they were encoded. Each page's code appeared to be different from the last, which made

matters more challenging. His mother was a scientist, an alchemist, a magician, all of the above and all in secret. She knew how to keep something under wraps. She trusted that her son knew how to find a way through it.

Naturally, Varian felt alive. As he got closer and closer to cracking the first page, he felt the world come back to life around him.

The new spring in his step did not go unnoticed. Dad seemed to take it with quiet relief, just happy that his son was responsive again. Aunt Adira and Uncle Hector were less easily accepting of the change.

“What’re you scheming?” Hector asked, unprompted, when Varian came down to the kitchen.

Varian, chewing a granola bar, froze. “Nothing.”

Adira, who’d been silently watching him, narrowed her eyes. “Sure.”

Varian was about to defend himself further, when he heard Hector bark out. “My money’s on you burning the house down, her’s is on—”

“I’m not betting on my nephew’s antics.”

Varian used their sibling arguing as an excuse to leave the room.

Other than to eat and stay alive and feed Ruddiger, Varian spent most of his time in his room, pouring his energy into decoding his mother’s research. For the most part, despite his aunt and uncle’s curiosities, no one bothered him or seriously questioned what he was doing, simply happy he was acting like himself again.

By the end of the week, Varian decoded the first page. It was mostly research, technical jargon galore, and all of it theoretical, but the purpose of it became clear to the young man when he read between the lines.

Ulla was studying the Storybook of Legends. She was studying how destiny works, if people really do disappear, and if so, how quickly, and how to stop it.

Most importantly, she was trying to find a way out of destiny. She wanted to completely de-power the Storybook of Legends.

Ulla was a Rebel.

Was there a How-To guide for finding out your mother was attempting to de-powering of the Storybook of Legends!? If that exists, Varian would really appreciated it.

‘Borderline illegal’, she’d said in the letter. Now that he knew what she was talking about, ‘Borderline’ sounded fairly accurate. Not only did this go against her destiny, it went against every destiny. It went against destiny as a concept!

First thing Varian did was try and find if this kind of research was actually illegal. From the looks of it, it was the kind of thing that was so outlandish, there wasn’t even a real law against it. That didn’t mean it was any less shocking, or that Ulla wouldn’t have been in massive trouble for it if

people found out. Varian didn't doubt that someone like Queen Snow White, who was in power thanks to her story, would take serious issue with it.

Even on a smaller scale, Ever After High's school administration would blow their lid if they heard about this! The first page of notes revealed that Ulla wasn't allowed near the Storybook. Headmaster Grimm wouldn't let *anyone* near the thing for the sake of studying it.

So, the question had to be asked: Who could Varian talk to about this?!

His family was off the table for now. He couldn't go into a conversation about *this* with *them* (specifically his dad) without having his thoughts in order; and his thoughts were anything but orderly right now.

Varian briefly toyed with the idea of talking to his Rebel friends. They wouldn't try to rat him out. Hell, even if they weren't Rebels, they probably wouldn't. They were good friends like that. But, Varian hadn't spoken to them since he left school. They'd been calling and texting him, trying to at least. He still hadn't responded. He hadn't even read the texts.

Varian signed, even after they believed in him so fiercely. They thought he'd be brave, and instead he'd been a coward. He'd let them down. Varian didn't want to face them, even over text. He certainly didn't want to start the conversation with *"Check out all this basically illegal shit I happened to find in my mom's shed! Cool right?"*

So no, not them. Not yet.

This required a fellow scientific mind.

One friend. He could handle that for now. Someone who he didn't let down. Someone who wouldn't freak out.

Before he could decide which of his scientific friends, at that exact moment, one of them called him.

"Oh good you picked up!" Nuru glared sternly back at him through the video camera.

"Yeah, yeah, sorry," Varian sputtered out, adjusting his phone, propped up on his desk. "Things have been crazy. I'm home, by the way, and I wanted to talk to you about something—" Then, totally not because he wanted to avoid the topic, he took a better look at Nuru's surroundings on the screen. "Is that my room?"

Nuru was about to answer, when a familiar middle schooler ran into the frame. "Varian!" Yong took the phone from Nuru's hand, her words of objection echoing in the background. "When are you coming back?! I miss you! We all do!"

"I miss you too. All of you," Varian said, his heart twisting from how much he missed everything. At the moment, he was ever so slightly distracted though. "Uh, why are you in my room?" It depressed him how bare his side looked.

"We're here for Hugo!" Yong smiled, holding Olivia in his hands.

"Hugo?"

Nuru returned to the frame. “He’s been acting all mopey since you left, and we happened to notice,” Nuru said, her expression suggesting it was hard *not* to notice. “I was fine with leaving him like that, but Yong wanted to try and help.”

“By being in my room?”

“It’s a surprise!” Yong yelled, popping back on screen. “To cheer him up!”

Yep. Because Hugo loved nothing more than people in his space. Totally.

Speak of the devil, and he shall appear. In the back of the screen, the door opened, and the distant image of Hugo appeared. He was very out of breath, like he’d run there. “Second time in a week my intruder alarm’s gone off. What are you two doing h—”

Suddenly, he noticed the phone Nuru was holding. Specifically, who was calling from it.

“Goggles,” Hugo rushed over, taking the phone from Nuru, who again could be heard objecting. At first he said nothing, just staring back at the freckled student. Then he glanced around, slowly growing confused. “What are these two doing in *my* room?”

“How should I know?” Varian feigned obliviousness.

A ghost of a smirk crossed Hugo’s mug. “Because you always know things you shouldn’t.”

“Hey!”

Hugo smirked at his former roommate’s outrage. Then, he sighed, lined with melancholy, as if was thinking something heartfelt and sad.

Varian missed him too.

Then, Varian remembered the reason he called in the first place, all of his mom’s research and goals. “Actually, you’re right.”

Hugo scoffed. “I always am.”

Ignoring him, Nuru took the phone back, making a face at someone off screen (Varian assumed Hugo). “So, bickering with your roommate aside, what did you want to say earlier?”

Varian brought the notebook into the video frame. “I need a fellow scientist’s eyes on this.”

“Sure thing,” Nuru said. On either side of her, Hugo and Yong popped into frame.

“Good thing you have two here.” Hugo butted in.

Yong jumped in as well. “Three!”

“Okay,” Varian stressed. “But you can’t tell anyone about what I’m about to show you. I mean it. No one.”

“I swear,” Nuru and Yong both echoed. Hugo glanced this way and that.

Varian grit his teeth. “Glasses?”

Oh he is just too easy to rile up. Hugo smirked. “I swear, Goggles. Let’s be honest though, this probably won’t be worth telling anyone anyway.” He mockingly crossed his heart.

Briefly, Varian considered not telling them about all this. Specifically, not telling Hugo. The blond loved his destiny; he was more dedicated to his legacy than anyone else Varian met. Would telling him that his mother was once trying to bring down the whole damn system that his destiny was powered by really be a good idea?

Varian remembered his words on Legacy Day, when they were back in the dorm together. “*You’re a rebel! What does it matter whether you are told you have a choice or not.*” Even if he wouldn’t admit it, ever since that night in the kitchen, Hugo understood Varian’s need to find his own path away from destiny. Hugo could have his destiny, and support Varian for not wanting his, however different they were. And he had, at the end of the day and despite it all.

All rationale aside, Varian simply wanted to tell him, as much as he wanted to tell his other scientific/magical friends (including Hugo). He wanted their thoughts.

Varian started by explaining what he found in the shed. From there he went to the decoding process he’d been dealing with all week. Finally, he revealed what the research said thus far, and what the goal seemed to be.

He watched his friends cautiously as he spoke, waiting for some sign of freaking out.

All in all, they took it pretty well.

Hugo sat on his bed, head in hands, staring at the ground. Near him, Yong sat on the ground, quietly asking a million and one questions aloud, none of which anyone in the room could answer. The only one still standing was Nuru, still holding her phone and on the video call with Varian. She was nodding as he finished explaining what he’d found. She was rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet, dazed even as she listened.

All three of the students were listening. Processing. All that good stuff.

“So,” Varian started. “Thoughts?”

Off to the side, Varian could see Hugo lift his head. His expression was completely opaque. He didn’t say anything.

Yong sprang from where he was sitting, rushing back to Nuru and the camera frame. “I think,” his energy faltered. “I guess I don’t know what to think.”

“Fair.” Varian next waited for Nuru’s thoughts, but she seemed quite dazed. “Are you okay?” Varian asked his friend. Nuru blinked, nodding slowly, before the nod formed into a shake of her head. Varian half-smiled. “Again, fair.”

Nuru cleared her throat. “It’s just a lot to take in.” Her brow furrowed. “And you didn’t know your mom was looking into this stuff?”

Varian shook his head. “No clue before this week.”

“Huh,” Nuru said. “And you’re only one page in?”

“Well, almost two now.”

Nuru let out a breath. “Well, if I’m being honest, there’s only one thing to do. You have to keep decoding it. That kind of research, taboo or not, could be worthwhile. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge, you know?”

Varian smiled with relief.

A snort of laughter caught his attention. Behind Nuru, Hugo struggled to contain his reaction. Hugo laughed like he was trying *really hard* not to. It would have been endearing if it wasn’t utterly confusing to Varian himself.

The shorter student frowned. “Something to add?”

Hugo let out a sigh, still giggling slightly. He scratched the back of his neck, not staring directly back at the video feed. “You... you aren’t being serious right? You read one and a half pages of an untested backwater thesis paper, one that sounds far from legal by the way, as you seem to know, and you think... what? It’s the answer to all the world’s problems? It’s not even tested data! Some alchemist you are,” Hugo said,

Okay. When he put it like that, maybe, just a little bit, Varian could admit: it sounded insane.

“But what if it’s true?”

“As if you’re in any position to prove it,” Hugo muttered, standing from his bed and coming closer to the camera. Nuru elbowed him lightly, silently urging him to be nice.

Varian asked for no such luxury. “But what if it’s true?” He repeated, like a lifeline.

Hugo held up his hands. “Fine. Let’s say it’s possible,” he wasn’t laughing anymore. “What’s your end goal? What do you want to come from all this?” Hugo said, suddenly enigmatic, unreadable.

Varian froze, despite himself. There was a lot we could say to a question like that, and this early into this research. But, there was really only one answer that mattered. “To start, I don’t want to be Dorothy.”

“So you’re going to completely nullify the Storybook? I doubt that will go over well with the Royals,” Hugo said. He meant so many people, but it was most obvious that he meant himself.

“Well,” Varian began. “Who’s to say it would have to affect everyone? Maybe in these notes is a way to make it optional. People could choose, really choose, whether or not they sign.” There was only one way to find out.

“I hope you’re right,” Hugo said, the hesitation in his voice so prominent it hurt Varian to hear. For a brief moment, something softer broke through. “Anyway, I know better than to tell you all the reasons I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Hugo said, grinning slightly.

Varian smiled back. Another face sprang back into the frame.

“And we can help!” Yong jumped.

“We can?” Nuru asked, hopeful.

“We?” Hugo asked, less enthusiastic.

“Yes!” Yong beamed. “You just need to come back to school!”

Easier said than done. Varian thought. *Dad will probably say that now that I’m a Dorothy, I should stay on the farm and wait for my story. But, according to mom’s notes, I —*

“Wait, can he do that?” Yong asked, speaking a mile a minute. “He’s Dorothy now. He doesn’t already have to stay on the farm, right?”

“That’s an *after* his story thing,” Hugo said, ruffling the middle schooler’s hair, seemingly without thinking. Yong giggled.

Nuru tapped her chip. “He said his mom did her own research before her story, according to her notes. So, Varian shouldn’t have any problem coming back to school for now.”

“Sure,” Hugo said. “But unproven data is a bad thing to go off of any day of the week.”

“Her travels *are* the proof,” Yong emphasized. He looked at Varian. “Right?”

Varian watched his friends, as they began to debate all that he’d just shown them. They were scientists, magicians, alchemists... he was so glad to have friends like them.

A knock echoed from Varian’s door. Behind it, his dad’s voice said dinner was ready.

“I’ll be right down!” Varian shouted back, quickly wishing his friends goodbye. Just before he hung up, Varian heard Hugo yell, “Tell your friends to stay out of my room Gogg—”

Varian laughed, really laughed, for the first time in a while.

Setting that aside, his friends did have a point. Varian could decode his mother’s research all he liked at home, but if he ever wanted to actualize it all he would need to go where the Storybook of Legends was. He would have to go back to school.

He wanted to go back.

There was one thing stopping him. One person.

After dinner, Varian told his dad that he wanted to talk. He tried to sound calm.

“I want to go back to school.”

The conversation wasn’t so calm after that.

Quirin’s obvious, and immediate, answer was no. Varian wouldn’t back down. The back and forth went on and on and on some more. It got to the point where Adira and Hector were about to intervene. Then, to their surprise, Varian left the room. They must have thought he’d given up the argument, because they were even more surprised to see him walk back in.

But nothing compared to the surprise Quirin wore when Varian placed his mother’s research notebook, and her letter to her son, onto the table. A pin drop could’ve been heard in the silence that followed.

Quirin spoke like he was listening for a pin drop. “Adira, Hector, I need to talk to my son alone.” They listened. Although Varian suspected they wouldn’t go far, worried about the argument re-escalating. “Where did you get this?”

“Does it really matter?”

“No, you’re right,” Quirin said, giving Varian a glimmer of hope, before it was snuffed out again. “What matters is what it told you.”

To his credit, Quirin didn’t say a word as Varian repeated what he’d learned. His father was no alchemist, or scientist, or magician, so the only part he really needed to hear was that Ulla wanted to learn about how the Storybook of Legends, see if it could be de-powered, and that she left to finish her quest to find out how.

But his father already knew that. Varian could see it plain. “I didn’t know she left you a copy before—” Quirin’s voice faltered.

Varian stared back at him, fury and desperation spinning in him. “Do you want *me* to disappear?”

“Of course not—”

“Then let me go back to school with her work. Or else I’ll run and probably disappear and you’ll never see me again.”

The childish remark did not affect Quirin. “You don’t mean that.”

“You know I do.”

Varian thought he sounded serious. Quirin did not look convinced. Perhaps it was because Varian wasn’t being convincing, or perhaps it was because his dad never took him seriously. Not his hopes, not his fears, none of it. He wanted him safe, even if he wasn’t happy. Even after all these years, Varian didn’t know how to change that. His patience was gone.

“Mom *wanted* me to have this. I don’t have to disappear. I don’t even have to be at *risk* of disappearing if I can get this right. I can decode her work and, hell, if she really did disappear because of destiny, maybe I can even find a way to bring her back,” Varian caught his breath for a moment. Could he really do that? It was too early to tell. But one thing was for certain:

Varian spoke clearly and honestly, leaving no room for doubt in his tone. “I’m going to do this, with or without you.”

In that moment, the look on Quirin’s face was unlike anything Varian would have expected. It wasn’t a look of surprise, it was more like remembrance. Like he’d seen a ghost. It faded into something softer. Quirin made his way to the kitchen table. He sat with a tired air. He motioned to the seat across from him.

Varian sat too.

“I didn’t know about any of this until the night before she left,” Quirin said, quietly. “Son, it was terrifying. She was putting herself at risk. So, when she asked me to help her, to be her eyes and ears off the farm for her research, I said no. I thought it would deter her. Even when she left, I thought, *she’ll come back before anything bad happens.* ”

“She won’t have given up, Dad,” Varian confirmed. “She was more than willing to do it by herself.”

“I know that now,” Quirin said.

Because she didn’t come back . Varian thought.

“Because she didn’t come back,” Quirin said. However hurtful it was to hear, neither Gale was alone in their grief.

Varian couldn’t remember the last time they’d talked about Ulla with words, without yelling, or without silences where they thought the same thing. They had each done what they could to cope: Varian practiced his alchemy, and Quirin tried to keep his son safe, like he couldn’t do for Ulla.

Quirin let out a quiet wheezing sound, halfway towards a cry and a laugh. “Trying to keep you safe is the hardest thing I’ve ever done,” he looked his son in the eye, his face carrying a heartbroken smile. “You’re your mother’s son.”

There was a finality to his words that Varian felt like he’d waited for his whole life.

“If you are going to do this,” Quirin said slowly. “You can’t do what your mother did. You have to keep me informed. I don’t think my constitution can take any more big secrets.”

Varian nodded frantically, getting up from his seat. “I will– I mean won’t. You know what I mean.”

Quirin was dead serious. “Tell me if you ever get in over your head.”

“I will,” Varian was buzzing with joy.

Quirin said nothing. Then, his father stood, towering, and approached his son. Varian stood quickly, thinking he might hug him. Instead, he put a hand on his shoulder. Coming from his father, this was an expression of respectful surrender. “I know you don’t want your story, but if you can’t figure a way out, if your mother’s work cannot solve any of your strife, you can always come home.”

“Of course,” Varian muttered, standing tall. “What’s the line? Oh, right. There’s no place like home.”

Quirin chuckled quietly.

Whether he was able to depower the Storybook (and free himself and everyone else who wanted out of destiny) or not, Varian knew that he could come home. Only now, he wasn’t going to let anything force him to do so.

From the doorway into the dining room, Hector coughed.

“So,” he twirled a knife in his hand. “I just lost a bet.”

Adira smacked him in the back of the head.

In the end, Quirin agreed to call the school the next morning and let them know Varian would be returning (and fill out any paperwork required to make that happen). From the sounds of it, the Headmaster was all too relieved to hear this. The administration hadn’t been happy about Legacy Day (obviously), and the idea of students dropping out as a result sent them into a brief frenzy.

Varian got a kick out of that.

The rest of the night, Varian made quick work of getting ready to head back to school. He'd need to de-wrinkle all his clothes when he got there though, because he didn't even bother folding them in his frantic state.

Surprisingly, Ruddiger was unphased when he was shuffled back into the animal carrier the next morning. Maybe he was getting used to moving around so much.

Well, he wouldn't have to be used to it anymore.

On the drive back to school, Varian was happier than ever. He was buzzing.

He thought of how good it would feel to see the school again. To be in his favorite classes. To live in his dorm room; well, that part was debatably happy (he was so happy). And to see his friends.

Oh crap.

Varian grabbed his phone, opening up his friends' group chat. Despite his newfound courage, he still couldn't bring himself to read their messages.

He wrote out a long paragraph at first, explaining pretty much everything. Then, he realized that after a week of no-contact, that might freak them out.

Instead, he settled for a simpler message:

I'm coming back. I'll explain everything in person. See you soon!

There was one person, though, who wasn't in that group chat.

Hugo.

Varian smirked, closing his phone, deciding not to text the blond.

Everyone loved a surprise.

Ever since that video call with his former roommate, Hugo found himself thinking about the possibility of the Storybook being de-powered. Even now, classes done for the day, as Hugo walked towards the castleteria, it filled his head.

Hell, who would've thought both of their mothers were involved in varying degrees of illegal shit.

It was stupid, to put it lightly. A stupid, nonsensical, completely impossible idea. Maybe people didn't go poof (Raven's actions seemed to suggest that), and that certainly set Hugo into a panic at first. However, that dusty old book wasn't something JUST a dusty old book. It was magic. Magic

was sometimes unknowable, and in this case it was ineffable. Ineffable things can't be de-powered. Simple as that.

If anyone else had told him about a crackpot theory like that, Hugo would've laughed (which he did) and moved on without giving it a second thought (which...). It wasn't just anyone who told him, though. It was Varian.

But that was so stupid. Varian was smart, sure. He was really smart. He was also determined, stubborn, with a smile that could move mountains... Something within Hugo believed that if Varian said this was for real, that such a thing could happen, then it was true.

The Storybook was already being called into question by his fellow students, and Legacy Day only heightened that line of curiosity. But all of that would die down. Hugo knew (believed) that it would. He would get his chance to sign, and all would be as it should be. Even if that left Varian in the shitty place he was now. Well, shitty to *him*. Hugo could live with it, and eventually Varian would too. Away from school. Away from Hugo.

"Hey roomie," Varian said, walking past him.

"Hey Goggles," Hugo said back.

The blond student continued on his path for all of ten seconds (and .01 seconds but who's counting?). When he did finally stop and turn around, Varian stopped too. He was holding the same bags he moved in and out with, as well as an animal carrier with a napping Ruddiger inside.

Let's just say, Hugo was less capable of acting cool at the moment. He was speechless.

Varian smiled, delighted and smug all at once. "You know," he laughed, approaching the blond. "This has been kind of a hellish week. Legacy Day, being dragged home, all the stuff with my mom. It hasn't been fun," despite the heaviness of his words, Varian's eyes sparkled. "Yet seeing you so stunned to see me again almost makes it all worth it."

Hugo's normally eloquent brain was mush. "A-almost?" He tried to recover fast. "Wow. Figured you thought more highly of me, Freckles."

Varian rushed forward, putting his arms around his roommate.

Hugo froze. At the same time, he left like he'd been lit on fire. When the shorter student let go, before the blond got a chance to hug him back (not that he was gonna), he didn't seem at all phased by his own actions.

Snickering softly, Varian patted Hugo's cheek. "Don't strain yourself, your highness." Promptly, he picked up his bags and marched down the hall.

Hugo definitely didn't scramble to catch up with him. He was perfectly calm, and no the spot where his roommate's hand had been on his face didn't feel warm at all no you shut up.

"Where are you going?" Hugo asked.

"My dorm, of course."

"You mean *my* dorm, farm boy?"

“*Our* dorm,” Varian said. It felt so good to say that.

It felt so good to hear that too. Despite how strangely happy he felt, Hugo sighed dramatically. “Will I ever be free of you?”

Varian didn’t give him an answer. He didn’t need to. This week, Varian saw up close and personal what giving up felt like. He was never going to stop fighting for the life he wanted ever again. For now, that life currently included rooming with Hugo. Not that he would willingly give the blonde student an ego boost by telling him that.

He knew the way to the dorms. With each step, it hit him more and more powerfully that he was back. He was back! Varian walked down the hallways, light pouring in from each window, illuminating the school colors that hung along the way. Reds, golds, greens. Varian soaked them in, all the way to his door. He was here to stay. Varian opened the door and all of his friends were waiting in his room.

Varian froze. So did everyone else.

Behind him, Hugo took slow steps out of the room. “You know what, I’m really done with people waltzing into our room. I’m just gonna go. See you later, Goggles.” Then he left Varian alone with his friends.

The room remained deathly silent. Varian stared at his friends. None of them looked exactly happy to see him. They didn’t look unhappy either. There was a hesitancy to them, like they were considering picking up a small, wild animal. Their behavior didn’t exactly surprise the young man. He still hadn’t read their texts to him; just sent them a heads up he was coming back. No context, no nothing. Varian still hadn’t really given them an apology. He figured they deserved that.

“Hey,” he began. “I know you’re probably more than a little mad. And you have every right to be. I was a coward. I let you down on Legacy Day. But I have a plan to make it up to you.” Varian started to rustle through his bag, trying to find his mother’s book. “If you can’t forgive me now, maybe after—

All of a sudden, Rapunzel rushed forward, throwing her arms around him, yanking him into a bone crushing hug. Varian stopped breathing. Both because of the strength of his friend, and his own confusion. “Rapunzel?”

The rest of his friends joined the hug.

Rapunzel sounded like she was crying as she held him. “There was never anything to forgive.” She pulled back, smiling. She quickly wiped her eyes.

Varian glanced around at his friends. The looks on their faces showed that they agreed with the blonde young woman. They’d never thought badly of him for signing. They didn’t hate him.

They were just scared for him.

Varian felt something jagged inside him, something filled with terror, something that was not just scared of how they thought of him, but scared for *himself* all this time, settle into place.

“Well,” Eugene said slowly. “There *wasn't*, until you scared us all to death by not responding to our messages!”

“I had to talk them down from storming your house,” Cassandra threw in. “Multiple times.”

“There were many tears,” Lance said, both serious and not.

Varian winced. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

“Hey, hey,” Rapunzel looked him in the eye. “It’s okay. We’re just glad you’re safe.”

Behind her, Nuru looked smug. Yong was similarly vindicated. Varian recalled all the ways he’d tried to make them feel better in this school year. Nuru being homesick, Yong being impulsive with science. It was about time Varian took his own advice and turned to the people around him when he needed them.

“So,” Rapunzel started, when the group hug finally ended. “You said you wanted to show us something?”

The shorter student nodded. “What I’m about to tell you is on a need-to-know basis. So, for now, please don’t tell anyone else.”

After swearing them to the same promise as his scientific friends, Varian told them all he knew, and what his end goal was. It wasn’t long before everyone in the room was hugging again. Varian was going to fight for the future he wanted, and everyone else’s futures. No matter what happened, he wouldn’t have to do it alone.

Varian Gale was going to be an alchemist. He would make sure of that.

Hugo avoided his dorm room for the rest of the day. Partially because he wanted to stay out of the way of whatever Varian and his friends were going through. Also, partially because he wanted to never see Varian again.

Luck didn’t just *fix itself* like that. Not for Hugo, at least. Not after maybe the shittiest week he’d had in years. Hugo was convinced that if he went back to the dorm room, Varian wouldn’t be there. He wasn’t real. He couldn’t be real. Maybe it was better if he wasn’t. Hugo needed to stay focused on getting back into Don’s good graces as soon as possible. For all her talk of needing him, he knew he was all too replaceable until he signed the Storybook. Varian would be a distraction, one that was already causing him problems.

The rush of joy his return came with was not all that Hugo was feeling. He was also feeling kinda ill. His face felt warm, his gut felt fluttery. Especially when he thought back to that moment of seeing Varian again. Which was STUPID. He didn’t look any different from a week ago. Still the same farmer’s clothes, dark hair with that bright blue streak, freckles galore, goggles on his head.

Then again, there *was* something different about him. He was standing taller (shorter than the blond, obviously); like when he was in class, and got an answer right or a solution worked perfectly. The look in his eyes...

Maybe Hugo should go to the nurse?

Suddenly, his phone rang. He answered immediately.

“Hey Don,” Hugo said, trying to sound relaxed. “What’s up?”

Donella didn’t respond at first. Hugo could hear a rustling behind her. It sounded like a car trunk being opened. “Are you busy?”

“Nope,” Hugo said. Even *if* he were busy, Don wasn’t asking out of kindness. She was asking because she needed something. “Just avoiding my roommate right now.”

Don hummed. “Well, get down here.”

Hugo grew confused. “Down where?”

“To the school entrance. I need your help getting my things into my new office.”

“New office?!”

Hugo ran fast. By the time he reached the entrance, he found Don and Cyrus standing there. She carried a few of her things, Cyrus carried most of them.

“I really didn’t want to bother you with this,” Don said as they walked inside. To the average listener passing by, her words would have sounded considerate. Hugo knew that wasn’t the case. They were distant, even more so than usual.

Hugo grabbed one of the boxes from Cyrus. He tried to grin. “Well, you know me. Always happy to help.”

“It doesn’t do you any good to grovel,” Don said.

“Can’t fault a guy for trying, right?” Hugo tried to sound like his usual self. It fell on deaf ears. He stayed quiet after that.

Eventually, as they walked, Don put him out of his ignorant misery and explained why she was there.

“Thanks to you and your screw up,” The Sorcerer began, her voice stabbed at her wanna-be apprentice, who tried to stay calm. “I will be giving some lectures on magic at your school. Only once a week, thank goodness.”

Hugo’s spirits rose remarkably. It would be easier to get her to believe in him again if they spoke in person more often. It must be easier.

Unpacking didn’t take long. Cyrus definitely didn’t do all the work, while Hugo ran around grabbing anything he could in order to help. He could feel Don’s eye on him every now and then, silent. For all the shiny items Hugo steals for her, Donella herself was a bit of a minimalist. Hugo assumed she didn’t want to linger in the school for very long, if she could help it. She never let herself stay anywhere she didn’t want to be, and her son knew that well.

“You get an entire office for working here once a week?” He asked. It was a big space. Secluded too, tucked away towards the back of the school. Quiet and likely not to have passers by most of the time. Perfect for the Sorcerer.

“My business here is about more than the lectures,” Don said. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

Her words didn’t assure him. He felt like he was being pushed out.

When there was nothing left for him to do, Hugo's desperation urged him to speak. “So, anything else you need?”

“No,” Don said, not looking at him. “You can go now.” In the same breath, she told Cyrus to go get the car.

“I mean it! You’re always busy, there’s gotta be something I can do.”

Don rolled her eyes, not saying anything for a moment. Maybe he’d pushed his luck too far, made her even more annoyed with him by nagging her. She’d told him once that someone too eager to help another person was the worst kind, because they weren’t being honest.

But then, Donella muttered something. “Not unless you can unlock the secrets of the Storybook of Legends.”

Someone who didn’t know her would have thought so. But some micro-tone to her voice that Hugo heard a million times before told him she was serious.

Hugo shouldn’t have hesitated. However, for a moment his voice came up empty. He’d never had to keep someone else’s secret before, other than Don’s. Those ones he kept under lock and key, until recently. He recalled the night he’d told Varian about his childhood. Honest with an asterisk; told him about being adopted by Don, but nothing past that point. Varian didn’t know he was a thief, or that Don was a criminal. He’d trusted Varian a little, and in turn Varian trusted him a lot. With the knowledge of his mother’s disappearance. Now, Varian did it again, trusting him with his own mother’s crazy theories about the Storybook.

Would that be useful to Don?

His expression must have given him away. Don suddenly stared him down. It was like she was staring into his soul. Like she knew precisely what he was thinking.

“Hugo?”

They were in uncharted waters. Varian found his means of swimming through it, with his mother’s work and his new, ridiculous goal. Hugo told himself that he didn’t need to justify what he did to swim through it too. Just as Varian was doing what he could, even if Hugo wanted nothing to do with it, Hugo would do the same.

Like second nature, like muscle memory, and all while ignoring the voice in his head that told him not to, Hugo told Don about Ulla’s research (what he knew of it thus far).

She wasn’t surprised by any of it.

“Did your roommate mention who his mother’s partner was?”

Hugo shook his head. “He said the notes didn’t say who it was. Apparently his dad didn’t know either. Or, he didn’t tell him.”

Don sighed. “Good.” There was relief to her voice.

Oh.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” Hugo said.

“Don’t act like it’s a surprise,” Don said. “*I’m* certainly not surprised she made copies before she disappeared; nor that it ended up with her son. Normally, I’d tell you to steer clear of him, like I told you from the start. Getting caught in association with him could be bad if her shit becomes known to the wrong people. But, things have changed now.”

Legacy Day changed everything. Hugo recalled her saying.

“I’ve offered,” she said, clearly meaning demanded. “To study, Storybook. Give old Headmaster Grimm proof of its power to make people disappear, to scare your fellow students into signing.” Don folded her hands. “If you want to help, I have a new job for you, no theft required.”

Hugo would have said yes immediately if he hadn’t been frozen in place by relief. He had a way back into her good graces. He’d do it, no matter what it was. So, he nodded.

“I need you to stick to that roommate of yours like glue. Help him decode those notes, and let me know anything they say.”

The seriousness that he toyed with earlier suddenly blanketed his mind. Whatever else this research said, it was legitimate enough for Don to seek out. This was a golden opportunity on a silver platter. Hugo would be stupid to say anything other than “Will do.”

“Wait,” Hugo said instead. “If you were her partner, shouldn’t you already know everything it says? Or even have your own notes from assisting her?”

“It’s been years, Hugo,” Don stared daggers at him. “I mostly just sent her materials. I didn’t do most of the actual research. Besides, after I cut ties with her, before,” Don trialed off, before picking up again like nothing happened. “Anyway, I burned all my own notes on the subject.”

“Can’t I just steal it from him?” Hugo asked. His mouth seemed to move all on its own. He’d never needed justification for her orders before. Why now, why with *this* task, did he want to find a way out?

“Thieving is one thing, but getting caught with something like that?” Don grit her teeth. “Let’s just say I’d like to avoid it. That’s why I don’t want you to steal the notes from him, I don’t want it on my person. Maybe before your last blunder, I would’ve considered it. Not anymore.” Disappointment and distrust dripped from her tone.

Hugo. Shut up and accept the job. His thoughts screamed. *She doesn’t trust you. You need a way back in. You can’t risk losing your destiny. You need—* His words rebelled. “What about—”

“Hugo,” Don said, leaving no room for him to say another word, or thought, until she let him do so. Her tone was harsh. Harsher than he’d ever heard it. “I may not have done as much of the work as Ulla did, but what I do recall, clear as day, is that there is no way to have your cake and eat it too. Either the Storybook is capable of being de-powered, and no one gets a story, or it stays as it is. There is no middle ground. You’ll see.”

Don steadied herself. “You’ll get your chance to sign. I’m going to make sure of that. The sooner Grimm gets the proof he needs, the sooner he’ll bring about the Storybook for signing again. But I can use your help along the way. So, you have to tell me now, are you going to be my apprentice, the Sorcerer’s Apprentice, or are you just some kid I found stealing in my lab?”

Hugo stood lifeless and silent as a statue. For years, he’s waited and done as he was told, keeping his place as her next apprentice firmly in his grasp. All while believing it would bring him where he wanted to be: standing before the Storybook, signing up for a Happily-Ever-After. Now Legacy Day had come and gone, and he hadn’t even made it to the stage.

Everything he’d worked threatened to slip through his fingers. Yet here Donella was, offering him everything again: her trust, another chance to sign the Storybook of Legends, a Happily-Ever-After.

Did he really have to think about it?

“Don’t ask obvious questions,” Hugo said. It occurred to him, as the words left him, that his voice didn’t sound like his own. Donella smiled. The sight of that stern, reticent smile, all at once told Hugo that he’d sounded exactly like her.

Hugo would be the Sorcerer’s Apprentice. He would make sure of that.

Chapter End Notes

AAAAaand that’s a wrap on the Legacy Day Arc!!! Hope you enjoyed this chapter! I left you with quite a bit of angst in the previous chapter, so I hope this healed all your broken hearts a bit! Or broke it in new ways :D

IMPORTANT NOTE: From this point forward, I can (and will) be changing parts of EAH’s plot, pacing, etc. Some changes will be pretty substantial, some very small. The world itself and its lore (which I’ll be exploring) will remain consistent.

Kudos and comments are always welcome. Remember to DRINK SOME WATER!!!

Work Life Balance

Chapter Summary

Varian stays busy managing big goals, old friends, new dynamics, and whatever's still to come, as best he can.

Chapter Notes

Covid is an evil evil thing and I had it yahoo but WE'RE BACK TO EPISODIC FUN LIGHT HEARTED SHIT FOLKS LET'S GOOOO (and some Hugo angst sprinkled in but we'll get to that when we get to that)!!!

Hope you enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Even as weeks passed after the disaster that was Legacy Day, tensions at Ever After High remained high. The one student who hadn't signed, Raven Queen (who had yet to disappear, or 'go poof' as it was called) still refused to do so. Consequently, Headmaster Grimm maintained his decision to postpone letting the rest of the students sign until she did.

The stand still in waiting for that to happen left most of the Royal students on edge, nervous on a level they never expected to feel about the sureness of their destinies. Some of them stretched beyond fear and into anger, snapping and barking at those around them. On the other hand, the Rebel students snapped and barked for different reasons. Defensiveness, hopeful determination, and more than a little smugness. Those who wanted out of their destinies, who hadn't already signed, let themselves enjoy the euphoria of having more time to be themselves. All in all, these contrasting emotions left many itching for answers to new questions. Not that there was anyone available to give them those answers.

Unless you were Varian.

The recently re-enrolled student gave no thought to the rising tensions around him. His focus was all but glued to cracking his mother's encrypted research. Even though he already signed the Storybook of Legends, this research provided the possibility of a way out. Whatever Ulla found out about the Storybook, it must have been important. It had to be. Even if it was unfinished, or a dead end, Varian needed to see it through. It was all on him. After all, he was the only one at EAH who knew about it.

Besides his roommate.

And Nuru.

And Yong.

And basically all his other friends (Rapunzel, Cassandra, Eugene, Lance), but besides them, it was all on him.

They all helped when they could, with heartwarming determination, but none of them had infinite time and energy. All of them still had work to do for classes, extracurriculars, on top of simply taking care of themselves. All of them understood this well.

Well, almost all of them.

Despite the tensions among the students themselves, classes were about the same.

In Science and Sorcery class, professor Rumpelstiltskin cleared his throat. “Can anyone tell me the core differences between a magically cursed object and a person who is cursed?”

Varian knew the answer. That didn’t mean he wanted to waste time answering it right then. He continued scribbling away in his own notebook, where he’d been storing all his attempts at decoding his mother’s research.

One of the focuses of Ulla’s work, it seemed, was examining past generations' stories and how they played out, including her own. Most of the time, the individual details of previous incarnations of stories were not recorded.

After all, if destiny forced everyone to play out the same story over and over, why bother mentioning if details changed over time. It was often assumed that the details *didn't* change anyway.

Varian himself didn’t even know the original names of previous Dorothy’s, besides his own mother’s name.

But, the more Ulla wrote about them, and the more Varian read, the more it seemed that little details *did* shift from generation to generation. A name here, a slightly different ordering of events there, even a case where the characters of the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion time were children! The story itself was almost entirely the same in each generation, and the details of differences were hard to find. Yet his mother’s determination to seek them out was clear in every pen stroke.

The page Varian most recently decoded was particularly intriguing. More specifically the end of it, when the notes alluded to a shifting detail in his tale that occurred further back than any other change. Unfortunately, the cipher hiding the meaning of the next page had been the hardest one to crack.

Consequently, figuring it out had all but consumed Varian’s brain. So, he almost couldn’t bring himself to focus on his classes. Even today, when the lecture was actually one that wasn’t basic and boring.

“Anyone?” The professor repeated.

The freckled student tried a few different approaches thus far. Nothing worked. Then again, he’d tried them last night, at a point of tiredness where he could barely count to ten, let alone do any real

work. Maybe it would be worth trying a few of them again. Maybe—

Hugo leaned into his roommate's personal space. "Backwards."

Varian blinked. "What?"

"The notes. What if we try that same method again, but backwards? It might work," he said, tone neutral.

"It might," Varian hummed. While Hugo's green eyes continued to scan the page, Varian found himself momentarily staring at the blond himself.

A little part of him was still waiting for the other shoe to drop, regarding Hugo. The other shoe being Hugo's tendency to make light of things, make a snide remark, generally just be annoyingly smug (and unfortunately slightly endearing in doing so) in that Hugo-way that somehow made it captivating and awful all at the same time.

These days, after their Magicology class together, Hugo or Varian himself would grab them both some snacks and sandwiches, while the other set up the note pages they were examining that day in their dorm. This resulted in them rarely eating in the Castleteria these days, but it gave them more time to work. And work they did.

After Hugo's initial reaction to the Storybook research, back when Varian was home and had only just discovered it, he'd assumed the blond would steer clear of his efforts. But, to his surprise, out of all his friends, Hugo remained the most dedicated in helping with the research. The day after he returned, Hugo, more serious than ever, asked if he wanted help.

Varian knew that he wouldn't admit it, but he figured Hugo was driven to help because he wanted to make sure he could still get his destiny if the Storybook got de-powered. As optimistic as Varian was (these days, at least), he truly didn't know if it would be possible. He remained optimistic, but Hugo seemed less capable of doing so. Not that he could blame him. This was important stuff.

The more Varian engrossed himself in it, the more it seemed like nothing else was as important.

Varian grimaced down at the paper. "But what if—"

"Gale! Cast!"

The roommates looked up. The professor was tapping his foot. "Anything you care to share with the rest of us?"

"No!" Varian said, a little too quickly. "No, just, trying to compare notes on today's subject."

Hugo nodded. "What he said."

The professor left them alone after that, thanks to them staying quiet. Although, Hugo did lean back into Varian's space to whisper: "Stop working on it in class. Do you want everyone to know?!"

It's just brainstorming. I don't even have the real research with me! Varian thought but didn't say. By the time class ended, Varian was still completely wrapped up in thinking it over, using all his brain power and energy to think on it.

Well, he still had a little energy for other things.

“Wanna get coffee and—”

Hugo moved away, suddenly. “I’m busy. I’ll see you back at the dorm,” before quickly walking away.

Varian tried not to think too hard on that. He also tried not to think too hard about how it was starting to bother him how *professional* and *detached* Hugo was acting around him. Sure, he’d been the most helpful friend Varian had in the past few weeks with the research. But beyond that? It was like he was living with a coworker. If even that.

But, as previously stated, he tried not to think about that

So much so that he didn’t hear Rapunzel calling out his name until she was right at his ear.

“Varian!”

He jumped. Finding her standing next to him. “Oh! Ha. Hey.”

The first thing he tried to talk to her about was the research. She’d helped where she could, but it was slowly becoming obvious to them both that while her artistic talent was immense, her linguistic/cipher skills were not as strong. That was okay with Varian. He would still seek out her help, as he promised he would with all his friends now.

So, his mind still focused on all this, the last thing he expected was for her to say that she wanted to bring back:

“Finders Keepers?” Varian asked. “You wanna do that game again?”

“Yes!” Rapunzel beamed. “After all the, for lack of a better word, bullshit we’ve been through this semester, I think it would be fun!”

“I thought we agreed the last time we played that would be the *last* time.”

“Oh it wasn’t that bad,” Rapunzel laughed.

Varian gawked at her, wide eyed and an eyebrow raised.

Rapunzel squeezed his shoulder like he was going to run if she didn’t. “I think it’ll be good for all of us.”

“Right,” Varian said, slowly, not believing her. “*All* of us.”

Rapunzel frowned, pouting at her friend. She was an open book to Varian; he’d known her since middle school after all. Just because he was focused on the research didn’t mean he’d gone completely blind.

“Rapunzel,” Varian said, trying to sound reassuring. “I promise, I’m not going to burn out.”

She didn’t look convinced.

“In fact,” Varian smiled. “I’m going to take a break this week, and help plan the game. Anything you need, I’m there. It’s the least I can do.”

“Good!” Rapunzel said, immediate and beaming. “Cause first thing’s first, we need to get the group to agree on an object to use. Easy peasy.” The sarcasm in her voice was obvious.

Varian laughed nervously. *This is going to be rough.*

As slightly annoying as it would be, Varian really did like the idea of bringing back the game. He could totally take a break from uncovering the research’s real meaning. That was definitely within his power to do.

Yep.

Finders Keepers was a game Varian and co came up with all the way back in middle school, back when it was only Rapunzel, Cassandra, and him. At that time, it was a way of keeping Varian’s mind off of his grief over his mother’s disappearance, as well as the general stresses that his friends were dealing with too.

When they came to Ever After High, and the friend group came to include Eugene and Lance, the game expanded. They played it once a year, freshman year, and sophomore year. Junior year they skipped it, due to busy schedules (and the disaster that was the game of sophomore year).

Now, in their last year at school, it felt right to bring it back.

The game itself was simple: An object was chosen. On game day, whoever had the object in their possession by the end of the day, was the winner.

Simple game.

Anything BUT simple execution.

The game almost always devolved into alliances, betrayals, war-like aggression, and a level of competitiveness that would concern even the most unphased of outsiders.

But, before any of that, the object for the game had to be unanimously agreed on. This debate was important to everyone who’d participated in the game before. The object of each game always ended up being of great emotional value post-game. In addition, the decision of the object was one that could give an unforeseen advantage to some players. They knew this from experience.

So, the decision could not be made rashly.

That day, the gang was gathered together for dinner in the Castleteria, half eating, half debating the logistics of the game.

“We aren’t using Pascal as the object!” Eugene insisted.

“Why not?” Rapunzel questioned. Normally, she would never dare to let Pascal out of her sight for such an uncertain amount of time. In this instance, however, Varian assumed she knew it may provide her a strategic advantage.

“Because you’re not winning that easy,” Lance said.

“Come on,” she put her head in her hands. “We used my favorite hair brush the first year, didn’t we? This is the same thing!”

Varian and Cassandra winced, remembering those circumstances a little too well.

“That was by accident,” Cassandra pointed out. “And that wasn’t even a game at first.”

“And hair brushes can’t crawl their way back to their favorite person,” Lance added.

Cassandra rolled her eyes. Rapunzel accepted defeat.

That was for the best. Even if she was the one suggesting it, any scenario in which Pascal wasn’t around her potentially could be disastrous. He shuddered remembering the blue pet-astrophe of earlier that semester.

Though, the thought of the magic involved in that incident led him back to his mother’s research. A mind wanting to stay on a specific topic will do anything to get back to it.

He began to wonder if the problem with the current page was a magical one. Maybe the ink needed to react to an animal nearby, then it would reveal its message. Would that be possible? Maybe he could let Ruddiger walk across the page. Usually he tried to keep him away, he had (adorable) sharp little paws after all. Still, maybe—

“Varian?” Eugene said.

The freckled student blinked. His friends had gotten up, and were following Cassandra somewhere. “You coming? Cass is gonna show us her ideas for the object. I need you there to watch my back,” he half-joked.

“Yeah, yeah,” Varian scrambled to stand from the table.

Cassandra opened her closet. She gestured to the inside of the doors, which were covered in weaponry she’d set up, organized, and maintained.

The gang stood there, varying degrees of intrigue and terror on their faces.

Unphased, Cassandra spoke. “What’s the problem?”

The friends looked amongst each other.

“I just worry,” Lance said, slowly. “That any potential struggles over an object so sharp could end in violence.”

“I don’t see the issue.”

Nuru was the only one laughing. The rest didn’t see it as Cass joking around.

As the gang tried to explain to her why any of these weapons would be a bad idea (she knew full well why they would be, but watching them try to gently explain it was amusing), Varian became lost in thought, looking at one of the blades’ reflective surfaces.

He began wondering if the page he was stuck on in his research might have a code within the page that needed to be cut up to see. That was a terrible idea though, since if he was wrong the page would be destroyed for nothing.

Maybe it was reflective? Maybe.

Yong was the first to find a middle ground in the debate. Even though the middle schooler only found out about the game that same week, Varian could tell that he was very excited to be included.

Unfortunately, his idea was a little complicated.

“Can’t we find a haystack?” Yong asked.

Varian patted him on the back. “If we did, then we’d know where it was hidden.”

“But it’s a needle!” Yong pointed out. “So, finding it would still be hard.”

The middle ground was the decision on sizes. The object would have to be small enough to be held in a satchel, but not so small that it could be lost in one, like a needle.

Beyond that, nothing else was agreed on. Following that, the debate got heated once again.

Not that Varian really noticed.

Nuru brought about the next middle ground decision.

“I mean, have any of you ever held a star?” She said, literally starry eyed. “I’m telling you, it would be the perfect object! I can bring one down for the day and everything!”

Her enthusiasm was palpable. However...

“Um,” Rapunzel spoke up. “Aren’t stars really hot?”

“Yes,” Nuru said, all confidence, no qualms.

“So,” the blonde continued. “Since none of us other than you have star-related powers, wouldn’t holding it severely burn us?”

“Ye—” Nuru’s face fell. “Oh.”

Normally, Varian would’ve been the first to (gently) point out this issue. But, his mind was elsewhere.

Rapunzel’s dorm room was, in a word, sunny. Figuratively and literally. She decorated the room with paper suns accented by every color in the rainbow (most prominently purple). By virtue of being actual royalty (even though she was ironically not a Royal by her fellow student’s standards,

seeing as she didn't want to follow her destiny), she was still given preferential treatment by the school administration. So, she got one of the best dorm rooms. The space soaked up tons of afternoon sunlight, had quiet neighboring students, and was undoubtedly one of the largest living quarters available to students.

Thankfully, the princess wasn't one to hoard all that space to herself. Today was no exception. Yong had gone home for the weekend, and Eugene and Lance were busy with a class project, so it was just Varian and the girls there.

Varian sat on her floor, as she carefully painted his nails. Hers were already purple.

"Painting calms everyone down," Rapunzel said, again.

Cassandra snorted. "It calms *you* down."

"Well," she backtracked. "It keeps everyone from waving their arms around in anger, at least."

That it did. While most of the friends present were able to speak in peace, Varian found himself zoning out. He couldn't decide between the colors presented to him.

In the back of his mind, he heard Cassandra say something that shut down Rapunzel's argument for what the object should be. As a result, she leaned towards him, hoping he would back her up. When he didn't respond, she left him be.

Nearby, Nuru finished trying to add little stars to her nails, extending her hand to her friend. "What do you think?"

Varian continued to stare at the colors, thinking about the patterns they could make if they were used on each finger. Every code, cipher, you name it, worked like a pattern. It was all about finding the key. The base pattern. Maybe he needed to go back to the basics.

"Varian?" Nuru repeated. "What's—"

"Bilateral substitution array!" Varian exclaimed, scrambling up from his seat. "Hey, sorry, I've gotta go," he said, already running out the door.

As he spent the night working, without rest, at the page that had him stuck, he didn't even notice that his nails were only half painted orange and blue.

Even when Varian was brought out of his focus by the promise of a day in Book End, he spent most of the time in the other stores typing down ideas to try to reveal the page's meaning later. It got so bad that by the time he and the gang actually did reach Lair-Essentials and Broom-Repair store—L.A.B; his phone was dead.

That was okay, though. He was content to listen to his friends as they chatted about this and that, even chiming in here and there, while he browsed for supplies.

Varian was in the middle of comparing the prices of new beakers for his dorm lab, when it suddenly hit him.

Invisible ink! He thought. *The code could be nonsense and she could have the real words written between them.*

He scrambled for anything to write his ideas down on. Phone still dead.

The closest person standing near him was Eugene. He was looking at him, as if in the middle of a sentence, when Varian cut him off.

“Can I borrow your phone?”

Eugene’s expression changed to worry at his friend’s panicked tone. He rustled through his pocket, quickly taking out his phone. “Sure—”

Varian didn’t wait, taking the phone from his hand. Frantically, and with more than a few typos. He sent himself the details of the idea, just in case he forgot. Still, even after pressing send, Varian buzzed with newfound, all-consuming energy.

“I have to go. Back. To my dorm. Need to try out this new idea.”

“Right now? But we didn’t finish—”

Once again, Varian didn’t wait. He was out of L.A.B. in a matter of seconds, all but running back to his dorm to try out this new idea. Once he was there, he barely even thought about how hard his head was pounding.

His roommate, on the other hand, did notice how hard he was breathing. How tired he looked.

To Varian’s credit, he didn’t run out on his friends like that again like that. Mostly because it made his friends (specifically Rapunzel) sad.

Instead, he simply said he couldn’t join them.

“I’m just really busy with, well, you-know-what.” Varian said, trying to be mindful of the public setting. Going around saying you were trying to work on your mother’s findings meant for understanding and eventually depowering the Storybook of Legends was not what Varian considered a smart thing to do. Usually.

“And you-know-who,” Lance mumbled.

Rapunzel pat Varian’s shoulder. “Are you sure? You’re really pushing yourself hard lately.”

“I’m fine,” Varian said, with a dizzying quickness that suggested he was not, in fact, fine.

Well, that suggested it, but Varian walking into the door on his way out confirmed it. Once he got his bearings, he was fine.

Yep.

The friends, minus Varian, watched him go.

None of them wanted to say anything before now, but after seeing how consistently distracted he'd become, the question had to be asked:

"So, we agree he's headed towards a burnout, right?"

"Oh yeah."

"Undoubtedly."

"No question."

"What's burnout?"

"It's imminent."

In years past, when Varian worked himself into a burnout before, there was seemingly no way to stop him beforehand. All of them could, and had at one point or another, recommended he take a break. They did again this time.

The next day, around dinner time, Rapunzel and Eugene found Varian walking down the hall, head buried in his notebook, frantically scribbling ideas decoding the page he was *still* stuck on. This page was, for lack of a better word, fucking-annoyingly-difficult.

Rapunzel and Eugene exchanged a look before approaching their friend. Their suspicions of an impending burnout were growing by the second.

"Varian?"

Rapunzel said, trying to wave him down. He walked right past her. She ran up to him and tried again. Still didn't work. Finally, Eugene held out a hand and let his friend walk straight into it with a quiet *oof*.

"Oh!" Varian stopped in his tracks. He laughed, nervous and frazzled. "Sorry. Didn't see you there."

Eugene smiled, still looking quite concerned for the freckled student. "We were wondering if you wanted to join us for dinner?"

"No can do," Varian shrugged. "I'm just gonna grab some grub from the Castleteria and head back to my room."

"How about tomorrow?"

Varian's mouth formed a thin line. He hummed for a long second, before quietly responding, "Probably not."

Rapunzel put her hand on his shoulder. "Don't you think you should take a break?"

Varian shook his head. "I can do that after I'm done with this."

"As in, done with that page? Or done with the whole process?" The look on the shorter young man's face suggested the latter. Eugene's face twisted. "Varian," he said, gently. "I know this is

important. Especially to you; your mom left it to you, and all. But, it's not gonna get done *right* if you don't take a break."

"That doesn't make sense," Varian snorted. "The faster I work on this, the sooner I can find out what it says, and once I find that out, then I can save everyone from the destinies they don't want and everything will be great and perfect and totally fine," Varian caught his breath, unconsciously fixing his goggles. "After that, I can take a break."

Rapunzel and Eugene shared a look of *oh boy* .

It would be difficult to argue that something didn't need to be said to Varian. Something to the effect of "*Your mindset is unhealthy and while the work is important you need to take care of yourself at the same time.*"

However, what both students knew was true of Varian was that he was the kind of person who had to learn his own advice. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. So the saying goes. So, they resolved to be there to catch him when he fell. They only hoped that, this time, it didn't end badly.

Despite his clearly better judgment, Varian kept thinking back to the words of his friends. Was he really pushing himself too hard?

Entering his dorm room, filled with glimmers of afternoon sunlight and the sounds of a scribbling pencil, Varian went to his own side of the room, taking his mother's research out from its hiding place underneath his bed. It really wasn't a very good hiding place; Hugo had told him as much several times. He'd find something better... eventually. Probably. Maybe. If he had the time, he could make some invisibility around it. Then again, if that went wrong, they could say goodbye to the research.

On the other side of the room, Hugo sat on his own bed, working on his theories and ideas for decoding the notebook.

Varian sighed. Wordlessly, he dumped the contents of his bag onto his roommates' bed: mostly pre-wrapped foods and a few apples. Then, Varian let himself flop onto Hugo's bed, research still in hand.

Hugo didn't even flinch. "About time you got back. I really didn't want to be working on this alone for much longer."

Varian let his right arm rest over his face. "Truly, you are suffering in silence." He heard him pick up one of the apples.

"Great," Hugo said; Varian didn't need to see him to guess that the blond was rolling his eyes. "You brought more opal apples," he said, tone deflated.

Varian, still lying down, arm over his face. "Well, excuse me, Mr. Just-Grab-Anything-Edible. Apples, yellow or not, are edible." Using his free arm, without looking, he grabbed one of the apples and rolled it to the ground. He could hear Ruddiger scrambling to where it landed, happily munching away.

“I would’ve thought it was obvious that these aren’t what qualifies as ‘edible’,” Hugo scoffed. “Really, I expected you to be smarter than this.”

“Right. Cause I’m a mindreader,” Varian said, half smiling. “Anything else I should know while we’re talking about such vital gaps in my knowledge?”

Silence followed. Varian removed his arm from his face. He looked up at his roommate. Hugo wasn’t looking back at him. Eyes still focused on his work, but his expression told that his mind was somewhere else.

He looked sad.

“Are you doing okay there, Glasses?” Varian asked, quieter than he intended. Hugo didn’t seem to hear him. Varian waved a hand in front of his face. “Hugo?”

The blond (finally) looked back at him, shaking himself off his stupor. “I’m fine,” he said quickly.

“*Are* you?”

“Yes,” he said, more forcefully. Hugo’s gaze snapped downward, still engrossed in the task at hand. Still examining the pages and jotting down ideas for their meaning. “I was thinking we should take another look at the idea that there’s a disappearance-factor to her writing on this page.”

Varian stared at him for a moment longer. Whatever was going on with Hugo, he didn’t want to pry it out of him. There would be time for that, if Hugo wanted to talk about it.

As they worked, Hugo spoke up, trying so clearly to sound casual. “Are any of your friends coming over to help this time?”

Varian hummed. “Why? Are you gonna run away again?”

Hugo frowned. “Drama queen. They just aren’t my crowd. Anyway, if it’s Nuru or Yong, that’ll be fine. At least they have brains.”

“Implying my other friends are dumb,” Varian muttered.

“If the slipper fits.”

“I’m telling Cassandra you said that.”

“Are you sure she’s not your sister or something?” Hugo asked, half-serious. “She’s scary, like the rest of your family.”

“Wow. Just digging your grave, aren’t you?” Varian asked. “But to answer your question, no. My friends are not coming to the dorm today. They’re a bit on my case at the moment about needing to take a break,” he said this like it was ridiculous. “I’m not sure why, though. I’m doing fine. Besides, this is important.”

“Agreed. You don’t need breaks,” Hugo said. It felt a little disingenuous. “Neither of us do. This is more important than anything, so it needs to be a priority. The sooner it’s worked on, the sooner it’s over.”

Varian nodded along. *Finally, someone making some sense.* As much as the shorter student appreciated his friends' concern for him, it was nice to have someone who didn't coddle him. Yes, he had a history of burning himself out. And yes, this was probably the most important project he'd ever done, and it wasn't even a school one. If he was going to burn out on anything, it would be this.

But he couldn't think about that. He couldn't. That would only slow him down.

Maybe after he got this page done, he'd take a break. Maybe.

As the days passed, the work remained stuck in one place. Varian became less responsive to his friends' invitations to hang out. He just really wanted to get his page done first. Yet, that page seemed determined not to let him understand. He was practically considering skipping it all together.

The more lost he felt, the more he began to consider worst case scenarios. What if this page had something ultra important on it? What if he just skipped this page, and it ended up having something ultra super important on it? Something that the rest of the research was based on? What if he was stuck on this page forever? What if he never got this research done? What if he really did have to go through with his destiny, and then he'd been stuck at home for real this time? If that happened, he'd be in the same position Ulla was in, stuck at home unable to put anything theorized into practice.

These thoughts swirled in his head as he worked, day and night, trying to crack this code.

He wasn't getting much sleep.

Hugo didn't seem much better. He was as rooted to the dorm as Varian was. Other than for classes, Hugo was avoiding wandering the halls of their school. When he *was* out of the dorm, he was jumpy and spoke very little. Like he was avoiding some nasty ghost that existed all around him when he left the dorm, that could appear at any time. Most of all, he was still avoiding banter with his roommate, quite purposefully, focusing all his words on their work.

Varian wasn't thinking much about that at the moment though. He'd never felt so frustrated by a project. The importance of it all didn't leave his brain, even for a moment. It left very little room for making sure he was drinking enough water, or actually eating good meals, not just the prepacked shit he grabbed from the canteen.

Somewhere in the mix of it all, Varian felt himself develop a slight cough.

That was probably nothing.

Then, as if out of nowhere, Hugo coughed too. Not like he was clearing his throat. Nope. He *coughed* ; like he was sick.

That was probably nothing too. Probably allergies.

"It's not allergies," the nurse grumbled. "Both of you have a cold."

Varian groaned. *Great. Just great.* He didn't voice his misgivings, however, because he'd found today that the longer he talked, the more he coughed.

Beside him, Hugo held his head. He was still coming down from a headache, no doubt caused by the cold. He held a tissue to his nose, anticipating a sneeze.

"Take these," the nurse handed them each a bottle of medicine. "Use two times a day, for the rest of the week. I'll forward the message to your professors that you'll be absent for the time being."

Varian and Hugo exchanged a look. A single thought crossed their minds.

At least we'll have more time to work.

Day One of being sick, the roommates tried to keep working on the research notes. They tried to keep most things the same, as normal as could be. Business as usual.

"That says 'furthermore', I'm sure of it," Hugo grumbled, pointing to the page, sniffing between every other word.

Varian looked again, trying hard to keep his eyes open. "That word has four letters."

Hugo looked at the page again. He pushed his glasses up his nose. "I knew that."

Later that day, they checked the medicine they'd been given. Some of the side effects included drowsiness.

So, they decided to skip the dosage.

This resulted in so much sneezing and coughing that they ran out of tissues and cough drops. They didn't skip another dose after that, despite the drowsiness it was causing them.

It really only got worse from there.

Day Two of being sick, they were still trying to work. However, their energy levels, as well as their ability to focus and think clearly, were abysmal.

Varian elected not to wear his usual wardrobe of farmer/Dorothy-like clothes. Not like he had to worry about getting in trouble for dressing outside of his destiny. He wasn't exactly going anywhere anytime soon. Instead, he wore a blue t-shirt and pajama pants. He also wore a chemist apron.

"Why are you wearing that?" Hugo asked, standing by his own closet.

Varian groaned, not looking over from his desk, as he attempted to keep working. "Because fuck you."

"Nice comeback."

Hugo was still dressing how he always did, which was by putting a hundred and ten percent effort into his appearance. His usual outfits involved shit like overcoats, gloves, leather boots, the best fabrics he could get his hands on, and even corsets. That day, he'd gone with a pristine white shirt with fluffy sleeves, jeans, and a green corset. This created a very strange contrast with his general demeanor, which was significantly less than a hundred and ten percent effort.

"Who are you trying to impress?" Varian asked, groggily as he tried to note predictions for the chemical solution he was working on. He wanted to test a little piece of the page paper, to see if the meaning was hidden by alchemical means. He'd ripped off a corner for that exact purpose.

Hugo pouted, trying for the third time to get his hair into its usual ponytail but consistently missing little strands of hair in his attempts. "Olivia."

The robotic mouse in question was asleep. As was Ruddiger.

Varian felt a twinge of envy towards the pets. More and more, his thoughts drifted to how nice it would be to collapse for a while.

But he couldn't. He just needed to keep working. Test the paper. Figure out the page.

He just...

Varian lifted the paper scrap, letting it drop into the readied solution. He tried desperately to keep his eyes open. It appeared as though there was no reaction. Hugo walked over to him, observing the solution carefully. The shorter student glanced at the research, flipping to the stuck page again. As he scanned it, trying to see if there was any difference from the tornoff corner piece, he tried to grab the vial. Right towards Ulla's notebook.

In doing so, he ended up knocking it over.

Two pairs of hands moved to shield the papers. Varian turned to his roommate, who's arms bolted to the desk blocking the spill from reaching the research.

Frantically, they checked that the paper was unharmed. Both of them sighed with relief, seeing that it was fine.

"Thanks," Varian said, before noticing where the spill had really ended up.

Hugo lifted his arms from around the notebook. His left sleeve was soaked with the contents of the spilled vial, leaving it a sickly, vomit yellow.

"Great."

Varian patted his shoulder. "At least Olivia didn't notice, right?" He tried to laugh, but it morphed into a cough.

Hugo shot him a very exacerbated, very tired look.

Day Three of being sick, yeah pretty much everything went to hell. Varian could barely focus on the words in front of him. At this point, even *he* could admit that trying to work any further in his condition would result in more harm than good.

Hugo was in an even worse state. He'd been able to get out of bed for a solid five minutes before needing to collapse again.

The only thing he'd managed to do in that time was change out of sweaty pajamas and into the most casual day clothes Varian ever saw him wear. Hugo wore a baggy green t-shirt, with the logo for a band he liked, that he kept stuffed at the bottom of his closet. It was way too big on him, the result of a shipping error on an order made earlier in the semester. He'd meant to send it back in exchange for the right size. But he'd been so busy. By the time he remembered to do so, there was no way he was getting a refund, let alone an exchange. In any case, it was soft, even if it did hang off one of his shoulders, so it would be useful now.

Along with the shirt, he wore a pair of wrinkled sweatpants and old slippers. He also let his hair down, due to his usual ponytail adding to his headache. Varian knew that was the reason because Hugo insisted on complaining about it. Repeatedly.

That wasn't the only thing he'd found the energy to complain about.

"This is all your fault," Hugo said, through a voice clearly hindered by congestion.

"What?" Varian said, coughing half way through the word. "How?"

"You coughed first."

"That doesn't mean I got sick first," Varian said, trying to hold down another cough. "I'm shorter, disease takes less time to hit me than it would hit you."

"That's pseudoscience."

Varian groaned. "Damn. I thought you were sick enough to believe that."

"Fuck you."

"Diddo."

Despite himself, the conversation brought a smile to Varian's face, despite his anger.

Coincidentally, as he smiled, Hugo stared at Varian. He stared at him for a while. Long enough that even in his sick state it seemed a little ridiculous to Varian. When he did finally stare back, annoyed that his thoughts kept coming back to Hugo's gaze, the blond immediately turned away. In the silence, finally free of prying eyes, Varian nearly allowed himself to fall asleep. But then, without warning, Hugo spoke.

"Can we pretend to hate each other?"

The question hung in the air, begging for an answer.

Varian blinked.

What.

He took a minute to respond. To be honest, he didn't know what to say. He didn't understand the question.

“What?”

Hugo continued to avoid eye contact. “I just—” he stumbled over his words. “Doesn’t that feel easier?”

It did. Weirdly. Not normally, but right now, in his sick state. Varian wanted someone to be mad at. He guessed that Hugo did too. But he didn’t want to be mad at Hugo. He didn’t want to be mad at all. Or frustrated. Or sick and sniffly and with a cough in the back of his throat, scratching at his brain.

He just wanted peace. Rest.

A break.

“You know,” Varian said. “Pretending to hate me isn’t going to help make you feel any better.”

Hugo managed to roll his eyes.

Oh so he has the energy for that. Varian thought, but didn’t say. “Trying to work isn’t gonna help us either.”

Hugo managed to scoff. Or, attempt to scoff. It came out as a wheeze. “Wow, coming from the Workaholic that is Varian Gale, that’s saying something.”

Varian stuttered. “You shouldn’t judge,” he said, coughing. “You have been just as serious as I’ve been. If not more so.”

“Well, I happen to have a better reason,” Hugo sighed, half defeated, half something softer. “With my mom working here to, to,” he started to say, before he seemed to catch himself, like he was considering what to say next very carefully. “To, uh, give lectures on magic. I need to focus on work. She doesn’t think friends are a priority. I don’t want to give her a reason to think I differ in that opinion.”

Varian wasn’t expecting that, but it did make sense. Hugo’s mom, the Sorcerer, sounded like quite the demanding parent. Even the limited info Hugo told Varian about her and about his childhood seemed to suggest that. It was no wonder that—

Wait.

Varian shot up in his bed, eyes surely bloodshot and wide. “*The Sorcerer* is going to lecture here?! What? Since when?”

Hugo’s mouth hung open. The beginnings of a word formed in his voice, but fell apart a moment later. Then, he snorted, laughing. “You didn’t know?” He kept on laughing, really laughing, viciously. “She’s been here literally since the day you got back!”

“W-what?” The shorter student was embarrassed, obviously, and more than a little amazed at the full extent of his own hyperfocus these past few weeks. “You’re the one who didn’t tell me!”

“I can’t believe this,” Hugo laughed some more, before it devolved into coughs. “The professors in our classes have literally been mentioning it. It’s extra credit to attend!”

Varian’s face felt so red. “Shut up! No way!”

Hugo wheezed with delight. “I am never letting you live this down.”

Varian sat there, fuming, in the echoes of his roommate’s laughter. But the embarrassment he felt sat side-by-side in his heart with something else. Something less dire. Varian found himself speaking before he could even think through his words. “I don’t think I’ve heard you laugh since I came back to school.”

Hugo shut himself up, hiding the last of his giggles with a cough. “Yeah, well, you haven’t been so talkative yourself, Goggles.”

Varian frowned, despite himself. He tried to think about the last time he let himself relax. Fully, truly relax. Not half relax and half stress about the research. It’d been a while. Even more recently, when he was with his friends, planning the latest session of Finders Keepers, something he thought would be fun, his brain had been wrapped up tight in a ball of stress.

That wasn’t a good feeling.

This research was a lot to think about. As passionate as he was about what good it *could* bring, to be honest he felt so scared not knowing yet if it actually *would*. Ulla left home to complete the research, so whatever she’d written so far must not have been enough. That alone left him desperate to see all of it. Every word. To find out just how much work there was left to accomplish. If it was even going to be worth it in the end was a whole other can of worms. And then there were —

Hugo coughed again, still sick as a dog.

Varian’s thoughts slowed when he looked at Hugo, who was staring at him again, but acting like he wasn’t. His hair, down from its usual ponytail, framed his face in a way that left Varian with a comforting, warm feeling. Like a cool cloth to his forehead.

A shame he rarely got to see Hugo himself relaxed.

“I don’t think I even asked you how you’ve been after Legacy Day,” Varian said.

“You didn’t need to,” Hugo shifted to stare up at the ceiling. “You don’t have to do so now either.”

“But I want to,” Varian said. It wasn’t an obligation. It was a kindness. Hugo stared back at him for a brief moment, then shrugged. He said nothing beyond that gesture. Varian figured it meant something along the lines of: “I’ve been as good as I can be.”

It dawned on Varian that maybe Hugo needed a break just as much as he himself did.

They’d become friends, or something adjacent to that, after that horrible paired-up project they’d endured. They’d dealt with the prelude hours of Legacy Day together, and the aftermath of the ceremony. But did they really have time to figure out what being “friends” meant between the two of them?

A wave of clarity washed over Varian. In his mind, Hugo’s attitude, his sudden distance, his over-achieving helpfulness, had a reason behind it: Hugo didn’t really have friends to begin with, so this must be new to him.

He doesn't want to mess this up. Varian didn't have it in him to be smug at the moment (although he made a mental note to be VERY SMUG later).

At that moment, there were more important things to do.

Groggily, and without a word, Varian pulled himself off his bed. From under his bed, he took out a tablet, which he rarely used but it had a few movies he liked downloaded. From his closet, Varian took out a few spare pillows and blankets. In the space between their sides of the room, he began arranging them together.

"What are you doing?" Hugo asked.

"Setting up a place to watch a movie," Varian fluffed up one of the pillows, setting it leaning against one of the legs of his desk.

"Do you really have the attention span for that?"

"Not really," Varian finished setting up. "But my brain needs shapes and colors."

"Okay," Hugo said slowly, still confused, sitting up on his bed. "Why not watch a movie in your bed then?"

"Because I'm not letting you get your sick germs all over my bed, your Highness."

Hugo blabbered, outraged. "You're already sick!"

Varian glanced up at him, smug. A look of realization crossed Hugo's face as he realized Varian was asking to watch a movie with him. "You gonna get down here or what?"

Ruddiger and Olivia scrambled to join Varian on the ground, making the shorter student laugh.

Up on the bed, still, Hugo was expressionless. Well, as expressionless as a sick person can be. Still, it seemed to be the hardest he'd thought about anything in the past few days.

Varian figured it must be his sick brain talking, but to be honest he *still* looked so sad.

Sluggishly, Hugo rolled out of his bed, slinking to the floor. All the while avoiding looking directly at his roommate, who simply sat there looking at him. Varian then offered him one of the extra blankets, and a pillow to sit on.

Hugo took them both without looking. "Shut up," he said, almost shy.

"I didn't say anything," Varian grinned.

The movie was okay. It held their attention, at least. What did catch Hugo's eye was a plot point about fixing an old car. The character who owned the car claimed it was unfixable. At which point, that character's love interest pointed out all the many ways it could be salvaged. This made Hugo chuckle.

"You know," Hugo said, voice still stuffy. "Most people think these kinds of mechanics are a dark art. An unknowable science only for a select few. But once you know the basics, a lot of it is intuition from there."

“How so?” Varian asked.

“Well,” Hugo started to say. Then he stopped himself. “It’s boring stuff.”

Varian raised an eyebrow. “You’re saying that to *me* ? Come on.”

“You know what I mean,” Hugo murmured, still trying to shut the conversation down.

“Humor me,” Varian said, a lopsided smile on his face.

Then, Hugo got this strange look on his face, and couldn’t seem to find it in himself to argue back. At least he didn’t look sad anymore.

The days after were spent relaxing and chilling out. No work, no stress. Comfy clothes, rants about science, mind numbing movies, even a makeshift blanket fort (which Varian and Hugo definitely didn’t fall asleep in).

The rabbit hole of goofing off led them to a heated argument (with no genuine anger) from when Varian off-handedly mentioned that between the two of them, he had the better musical aptitude.

Hugo took that personally. This eventually led them to debating whether or not Hugo could conceivably make a flute from scratch, as a way of proving who was right about the first argument. Had they still been thinking only about the research, and only about using their time as wisely as possible, it might have stayed a theoretical dispute.

Maybe in another universe. But not this one.

“Here, listen to this,” Hugo tried to play the make-shift, scrap metal flute, which ended up looking more like a recorder. He’d spent the last few hours building it, wiring it, and melding it together with an itty bitty high-intensity heat spell that definitely didn’t melt a part of his desk.

Unfortunately, as good of a hobbyist mechanic that he was, still did not know how to make a flute. It made a shrill, screeching noise. Immediately following it, Varian let out the loudest, most ridiculous laugh, which only further motivated Hugo to try again, which only made Varian laugh more, and so on and so forth.

The noise ended up getting so bad that other students came knocking on their door, telling them to shut up. Among these students were Eugene and Lance, who stuck around after the others dispersed back to their rooms.

“So, I assume you’re both feeling better,” Lance said, more than a little pleased. He then noticed the notebook on the ground. “This is your mom’s research, right?”

Varian glanced down at the book. He hadn’t even realized it was on the ground. He scrambled to pick it up, but Lance got to it first. It looked undamaged, much to Varian’s sudden relief.

Beside him, Hugo groaned. “Guess we should get back to work on it now.”

Varian nodded. Strangely, as still frustrating as he assumed it would be, he didn’t feel quite as bad about it now. He felt re-energized.

Lance, still holding the notebook, scanned the page. A beat passed, as he thought it over.

“Just read it backwards.”

The roommates froze. Then, they scrambled towards Lance, scanning over the page with him.

Oh. My. Fucking. God. Varian thought. It was so clear.

Hugo leaned against Varian’s head. “That was literally what I said. You were too tunnel visioned to see it!”

Varian shook him away. “As if you weren’t just as bad?! You came up with the *idea* , but you yourself didn’t think it held up to scrutiny—”

Lance handed Varian the notebook and backed away, leaving the roommates to their bickering.

Eugene nudged his own roommate as they walked down the hall. “Told you they still dislike each other,” he murmured to Lance, who looked at him like he was crazy, or blind, or both, before they both left the roommates alone to their “dislike” fueled bickering.

The decoding went very smooth as butter from there.

According to the newly cracked page, the Storybook of Legends *did* allow for some details to diverge in its stories, as the previous pages suggested. But, what this new page seemed to suggest was that it *always did*. It *needed* to.

When his story, the Wizard of Oz first happened, the Wicked Witch of the East died, and her death was still presumed since then in each generation, as it was always told as part of the story. However, according to Ulla, something changed in the story after it originally happened. While the presumption of death was always there, the Wicked Witch of the East almost always survived!

No one was more shocked by this than Varian himself. His story was always told to him the exact same way. That always included the death of *two* wicked witches. To say he was relieved that that didn’t have to be true was an understatement. One less awful part of his story to think about.

Ulla went on to write that the Wicked Witch of the East usually lived, then went on to have two kids who would be the next Wicked Witch of the East AND West. This silent change in the story was apparently also how the Witches themselves stayed sisters as the generations passed. Otherwise at this point they’d probably just be very very distant cousins.

Unfortunately, according to Ulla, the Wicked Witch of the West was still destined to die when water was thrown on her.

So, Varian would still have to kill someone.

He decided not to think about that yet.

He needed a break.

Varian closed his mother’s research, bookmarking the next page for later. Then, he stood, stretched his arms, grabbed a bag and coat, and headed for the door.

“Where’re you going? Are you gonna help me with this?” Hugo asked, seeing him prepare to leave. Gesturing to the next page of Ulla’s notebook.

“Later,” Varian called his raccoon to follow him. “Right now, I could use some fresh air, and I’m sure Ruddiger could too.” Ruddiger curled himself up by Varian, happy to stretch his legs.

“Well,” Hugo shoved himself out of his chair. “If you’re not even gonna help, then I’m taking a break too.” He said it like it was some horrible, cruel thing he was doing. Varian laughed. Hugo’s mockingly serious expression melted.

“You wanna come with us?” Varian asked.

Hugo waved him away with a quick dismissal. As he did, Varian noticed the taller student’s eyes filtered to the makeshift musical instrument. He didn’t say anything about it though, but he smiled smugly on his way out.

Later, when Varian did come back to the dorm, he found Hugo tinkering away at it, trying to make it work. He looked a little bashful at being caught.

“Not a word, Goggles.”

“I wasn’t gonna say anything.”

“Yes, you were.”

Varian laughed. Once again, Hugo broke into a grin, seemingly against his will. Varian suffered from a smile of his own.

After one more day of rest (as a safety precaution), Varian and Hugo were back to their non-sick selves.

“Fucking hell,” Hugo said, while they walked to class together.

“What?” Varian asked.

“I don’t think I made a single ‘sick of you’ joke while we were ill.”

Varian snorted. “Tragic.”

Hugo ignored him. “Want to work on you-know-what during lunch?”

“Not today,” Varian said. “My friends and I are still working on our game planning.”

“Right, right. The Find and Keep thing?”

“Finders Keepers.”

“Which sounds incredibly stupid, you know that right?” Hugo said, ignoring how his roommate scoffed back at him. “Dare I ask what it entails? I don’t want to be caught in the middle of your bullshit.”

Right. Not everyone was as well-versed in the language of him and his friends' bullshit. Varian was happy to explain (just this once). Surprisingly, the blond actually seemed to listen. He even asked questions! A tiny voice in Varian's head was starting to hope guess that his roommate actually wanted to participate. Unless he finished the explanation, at which Hugo spoke.

"Okay," Hugo brushed his ponytail off his shoulder. "Still sounds stupid."

"It's not stupid. It's silly. There's a difference. That's what makes it fun," Varian insisted. Then, a thought appeared in his head. "You should join."

"Not happening," Hugo smirked like he was above that kind of thing. "Besides, would you really want me there? From the sounds of it, I'd beat you in a heartbeat."

Varian rolled his eyes. For the most part, he'd allowed himself to forget about his initial view of the blond; that he might be a thief. Obviously, Varian knew that was untrue these days, and Varian had no reason to believe it. But still, Hugo was certainly crafty. He'd probably be very good at the game.

Varian crossed his arms. "It's a game for my friends. Like it or not, you're my friend. Despite your ridiculous assertion that you'd beat me at it, why wouldn't I want you there?"

Hugo's smile vanished. Before Varian could question this, the blond spoke, not looking at him. "I should get going. I'll be working in our room if you need me."

Varian wished him good luck (although not nearly as enthusiastically as he wished he had).

At lunch, once again, the topic of the object for the game came up. Still, no end in sight for the debate. When, suddenly, a new player joined the debate. From behind the freckled student came a soft 'ahem.' Varian nearly did a spit take when he saw who it was.

"Relax, I'm not crashing your table," Hugo said, half-serious. As if that would be such a terrible thing.

Varian didn't see it that way. "What's—"

"Catch."

Varian barely a second to react. His hands fumbled, but ultimately did catch what was thrown his way. It was the homemade flute Hugo made while they were sick.

Speaking of the blond, he was quite obviously avoiding eye contact with everyone at the table staring at him, other than Varian.

"It's for your game. There's your object. Problem solved."

Varian stared down at the object for a moment, before being unceremoniously pulled into a huddle with his friends.

Rapunzel, serious and hushed, spoke first. "What do we think?"

"The sound it makes is horrible," Eugene said immediately.

"It's homemade," Lance added.

“It’s made with love,” Yong said.

“I doubt that,” Nuru said.

“It’s unmistakable for anything else,” Cass said.

“It’s a gift,” Rapunzel said, smiling. “Since it was made by someone not playing the game, it won’t give anyone an unforeseen advantage.”

“It’ll remind us of this specific year!” Varian exclaimed. “If nothing else, the year I roomed with that guy.”

Eugene winced. “Also legacy day and the biggest shake up of status quo the school has ever known.”

“Yeah, sure.” Varian said quickly. “So, are we okay with this being the object for the game?”

Mercifully, they all agreed.

The huddle broke apart. Varian found Hugo still standing there, tapping his foot and glancing everywhere except at the group of friends.

“Thank you,” Varian smiled at him.

Hugo froze, if only for a second, at his roommate’s genuine reaction. “Don’t worry about it. I was hoping to get rid of it anyway. I’m no musician.” Eugene and Lance laughed a little. Hugo crossed his arms, beginning to back away. “Besides, I don’t want to keep distracting myself by working on it.”

“Still,” Varian made eye contact. “Thank you.”

Never one to linger, Hugo walked away, calling over his shoulder. “Thank me by keeping your game out of my hair.”

Yet again, Varian found himself smiling because of his roommate. That smile stuck to him even as he left his presence. Even as he disappeared from view, presumably returning to the dorm for the remainder of the lunch period.

Varian glanced around to find that the others were severely dumbfounded.

“That was…” Eugene said, choosing his words carefully. “Nice of him.”

“I mean,” Varian scratched the back of his neck. “He and I… we’re friends, so—”

Their little table stopped everything. A pin could’ve been dropped and heard like a gunshot in that moment.

Suddenly, Varian met with the reality that he never exactly told his friends about everything he and Hugo talked about during their group project, before Legacy Day, during Legacy Day, and after Legacy Day.

It wasn’t really all his to tell. Short and sweet would be best.

“Yeah,” Varian said. “We’re friends, I guess.”

While the debate on the object ended up being (finally) put to rest, as the group agreed the flute would work for the game, the debate on Hugo: Varian’s former rival-turned-friend, had only just begun.

Chapter End Notes

Finally. I have done it. I’ve made a sick-fic chapter (sort of)! Hope you all enjoyed this chapter!

SHOUT OUT AND THANK YOU TO NART-IS-A-MONSTER on tumblr who made some absolutely fabulous fanart for this fic!! In addition to helping me with the idea of casual outfits in this chapter! Thanks again!

Thank you all for your patience. I’m planning to finish this fic this year.

To all who’re reading, remember to take care of yourself, get plenty of sleep (especially when you get sick), and GO DRINK SOME WATER!!!!

Pathetic Fallacies and Falsities

Chapter Summary

Hugo finds something holding him back from adjusting to his new normal.

Chapter Notes

Alternate title: Hugo Tries His Best

Hugo centric chapter this time! I love writing about this emotionally unprepared, lowkey pathetic guy who acts way cooler than he actually is. Hope you enjoy it!!

Also, this chapter has a song attached to it in my brain. "Our Word" from the musical 36 Questions. I'm in the Tangled the Series fandom; me liking musicals should come as no surprise. If you know the song you'll probably see its influence in the plot.

Thank you to my friend @levlathan for sprinting with me and helping edit this chapter!!

OH SHIT ALSO HAPPY FIC ANNIVERSARY!!! Whether you've been here from day one, or just started reading today, thanks to everyone who reads my fic :D

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

In his school life, Hugo tended to act alone. He didn't make a habit of making the acquaintance of his classmates, rarely took part in extra curricular activities, and almost never talked about personal matters. But, above all else, he didn't see his adoptive mother in person. Even during move-in at the beginning of the year, Donella kept her distance. Of course, she regularly called, gave him tasks (thefts) to complete, and kept him in line, but did so from a distance. That was his usual "normal," and he was more than used to it.

This new "normal" however, he was less used to.

Ever since Donella, the Sorcerer, his mother, set up shop at Ever After High, Hugo began reporting to her in person. Every few days, he made the long trek through the winding halls of marble, tree trunks, and green ivy. He walked until he reached her office, where he spilled all the secrets his roommate, Varian, unlocked in his mother's research. Hugo tried not to think of it as Varian's mother's journal. Donella helped with that research. With Dorothy herself missing-in-action, it was basically Don's to have as she pleased. Sure, she didn't write it, or hide it all those years, nor did she currently have it in her possession, but she helped in its creation. If she wanted to hear what exactly was written down, to refresh her memory of so long ago, then who was Hugo to protest?

Today was yet another day of reporting to her. So, Hugo marched his way to her office, trying to remind himself that this was the new normal, so he better get used to it.

As Hugo walked down the hall towards the staff offices, his mirrorphone buzzed in his pocket. Pulling it out quickly, at first thinking it was Donella or Cyrus with some urgent demand, Hugo found his stress melting at the contact name.

Goggles

Are we still set to walk to the lecture together?

Hugo texted back without thinking.

Me

Do I have a choice? You'll get lost on the way there if I don't help you

Varian's text bubble popped back up almost immediately.

Goggles

Oh why thank you, your highness. So very generous of you.

Me

I do try

Goggles

That was sarcasm dumbass.

:I

Hugo snorted, despite himself.

Me

Noted. Just wait a minute. Just gotta get an errand done first

Hugo shoved the device back into his pocket. Amusement aside, the texts did bring his mind to another aspect to the new normal: Donella's lectures.

Don was in a tight spot. She needed to study the Storybook, prove its power, and convince the students to sign it. In a perfect world, she would've taken the Storybook back to her lair and done the research there. But, by threatening to expose Hugo's crimes, Grimm forced her to stay at the school. The lectures, and consequently her new status as a part-time educator, were just an excuse for her sudden presence at the establishment. Hugo's blunder gave Grimm a bargaining chip with the knowledge of his thefts. Hugo knew it, and so did Don. He needed to make it up to her; he'd do anything to make it up to her. If that meant spying on his roommate and swallowing his struggle to adjust to such a task, he'd do it.

Soon enough, he'd reached Donella's new office.

Hugo knocked. No answer. Slowly, he cracked open the door. Sure enough, Donella stood with the Storybook of Legends before her. He knew not to interrupt her work, so he watched from the door frame as she carefully worked on unfurling its magic.

Some considered magic as much of an art as it was a science. Well, Hugo wasn't one of those people, and neither was Don. Magic itself had a weird kind of blueprint to it. Don called it the magic's *essence*. Donella allowed the essence to spread out in the air, creating a humming noise as it did. The essence, purple in hue, appeared similar to an unfolding, very long sheet of paper; glowing, sparkly paper, that moved nothing like paper should. It really moved like water in a river. At its edges, it shook and threatened to split in every direction. This made reading its details and powers difficult, even for someone as experienced as Donella.

Exactly why she needed Ulla's notes, Hugo surmised. Easier to go search when you know what you're looking for.

As Hugo watched Don work, he noticed something strange. The more the unfurled magic of the Storybook stretched, the more it seemed to suck light from the surrounding sources. Hugo didn't think it would do that. That wasn't normal of most types of magic—

Suddenly, the essence snapped back into the book, as if resisting being seen. The whiplash from the motion sent a gust of wind around the room. If Hugo didn't still hold onto the door, it may have flung shut with a bang.

Did Don mean to do that? Hugo thought.

Don huffed. The stiffness in her shoulders suggested that she'd been at this for much longer than Hugo had seen. With the weight of the spell off her, she fell to one knee. Her huffs became heaves. Hugo rushed in, beelining to the Sorcerer.

"Don! You okay?" He tried to help her up, hand placed on her arm. She swatted him away.

"You're late," Don said without looking at him. After another few moments, Donella gathered the strength to stand again. Hugo held his breath. She went over to the Storybook, examining it with an almost critical eye, before putting it away in her desk.

"Do you have anything to report?" She asked, still not looking at him.

Hugo did. Although, it wasn't much. Just some more old tales Ulla found with small changes over time. More of what they already knew: the Storybook seemed to pick and choose what details it allowed to be changed. Nothing about how the Storybook truly functioned, or about how it could be depowered, if it could be depowered. Still, Hugo knew notes of that kind were coming. Varian would find out what Donella already told Hugo: Even if the Storybook can be depowered, it would be an all or nothing deal. Either the Storybook is completely depowered or it was left unchanged. Everyone gets their destinies, or no one does.

What would happen then? Would Varian ignore Hugo's ambitions to have his destiny in favor of getting a way out of his own? Hugo didn't want to think about that. He wouldn't. Not in Don's presence. He half believed she would hear his thoughts and scold him for it. Best to stay on topic.

After he finished rattling off his report, Donella sighed. Wordlessly, she walked to the door of her office. Hugo followed in her wake. Time for another lecture.

Then, Hugo's phone buzzed in his pocket.

"Oh, shit," he muttered, remembering his roommate. "Uh, Don?"

Donella hummed, already sounding annoyed.

Hugo cleared his throat. "I kind of promised my roommate I'd walk with him to the lecture."

Don stopped in her tracks. The glare she gave him wasn't necessarily one of anger or disappointment or any other strong emotion. It was mostly like: *seriously?* "Go," she said, already walking away.

"Better to stay on good terms with him. Better for both of us."

Hugo's stomach turned, unpleasantly. It was a burdensome feeling that he would rather ignore. Still, he didn't wait long before speeding back to his room.

Hugo definitely didn't run to his dorm. Nope. Unrelated to this running that didn't at all happen, once he finally got to his dorm, the blond took a few deep breaths. He also fixed his ponytail and glasses before he opened the door. His roommate was already inside.

Instead of fully entering the room, Hugo let himself lean against the doorframe. He half glanced at Varian, a purposefully relaxed smirk on his face.

"Hey—" was all Hugo could say before he was (rudely) interrupted.

"There you are!" Varian shot up from where he'd been lounging, bag already in hand. "We need to get moving or we'll be late!"

Varian took Hugo's arm as he dragged him back out of the room. Strangely, Hugo's brain went pure static. Not bad static, just fuzziness. It only ended after they were walking and his roommate let go of his arm. Hugo chose to ignore that feeling.

"Where were you, by the way?" Varian asked as they walked together.

"Nowhere," Hugo said, perhaps a little too frigidly.

“Oh,” Varian nodded, unbothered. “Alright.”

Hugo almost immediately began to overthink. *You shouldn't be so cold to him*, he reminded himself. *You're going to jeopardize everything*. The reminders weren't helping, no matter how many times he told himself that.

Distancing himself was always necessary before now. Hugo's focus was on his studies, on his magic, on being the best Sorcerer's Apprentice (unofficially, he knew, as long as he went without signing the Storybook) he could be. His friendship with Varian was a side hustle. A weird, unplanned thing that made his day a little less routine and organized. It was nice. It was really nice.

Now... it felt different. He was in uncharted waters, trying to swim. He was always trying to swim through shit, but this felt especially shitty.

Hugo was never ordered to spy on a friend before.

In theory, it was the easiest job he'd ever had. Yet, even with Donella's blessing to be close to Varian, to be his friend and confidant, Hugo hesitated. There was something underhanded about continuing their friendship on those grounds that made his skin crawl. Not enough to deter him, not in the slightest. Not at all. But still, the feeling was enough to make him pause. *That* in itself was concerning. Hugo didn't pause.

Don probably wouldn't like it, now that being friends with Varian was essentially a task he'd been given, but it would be easier on Varian this way. If he didn't see him as much of a friend anymore, he'd be less upset at finding out everything later on. If not about the spying and lying and general telling-Donella-everything, then about the Storybook being an all or nothing deal. The notes would eventually, surely, reflect Don's words, and then Varian would be forced to face reality. Some would be left unhappy no matter what. What would Varian do then?

Hugo kept asking himself that question over and over. It was a problem. It was distracting.

So, sue Hugo for reverting back to distancing himself. Sue him for trying not to care what state Varian's feelings would be in at the end of all this. So, Hugo resolved to try and pull back.

The key word here is “try” because actually following through with that was becoming increasingly more difficult when Varian was acting so excited and staring at him like that and crap he asked him something—

“What did you say?” Hugo said, disguising his genuine confusion with superiority. “I was just caught up thinking about how much smarter I am than you.”

“Boo,” Varian said, monotone, before his tone dipped into familiar annoyance. “Not your best insult by a long shot.”

“Maybe you don't deserve my best,” Hugo countered.

“Maybe you can't even match my best,” Varian said, smirking at him. Hugo's face felt warm. Then Varian laughed a little and Hugo caught himself smiling like an idiot again. Stupid (formerly) sick brain. Yeah, that was it. Being recently sick was what kept breaking his newly rebuilt shell of attempted-distancing down so quickly.

Definitely not Varian himself. Nope. Not at all.

As they approached the lecture hall where Donella would be, Varian waved to someone in the distance. Hugo adjusted his glasses, and groaned seeing who it was. Varian's friends. At least it was only two of them this time.

"Hey! "Glad to see your back on your feet," Nuru smiled, addressing Varian more so than Hugo as she joined them in their stride. Nuru didn't attend Donella's lectures often. Only if the topic really interested her (i.e: it had something to do with the sky and atmosphere). Today was on weather spells. Perhaps she held a hobby interest in such things; Hugo wouldn't really know. "I missed you in class last week."

"Thanks," Varian barely got time to say before Hugo interpreted.

"Oh, thank you Nuru," Hugo said, grinning entirely falsely. "I always knew you cared about me."

"Hey Hugo," Nuru said, neutrally, finally acknowledging his presence. "I see you aren't dead."

"Naturally."

"Hi Hugo!" Yong said, inserting himself into the conversation, beaming. Yong barely attended any, often already headed home to Oz for the weekend by this time on Fridays. Today must have been an exception.

"Have you changed your mind about joining our game of Finders Keepers?"

"That's not for another week, Yong," Varian added.

"Yeah," Yong said, nearly skipping as he walked beside them. "So he still has time to change his mind." Ever since he'd given Varian and his friends the flute he made for their game, which he refused to join, the youngest of them made it his mission to convince Hugo to join.

"Sure," Hugo said.

"Really?!" Yong yelled.

"Nope," Hugo said.

Nuru coughed. "Asshole."

Soon enough, they reached the lecture hall. Hugo noticed Varian's eyes almost immediately searching for the Sorcerer, who was (as usual) at the make-shift desk she commandeered.

"Don't act so starstruck around her," Hugo nudged him. "She can smell over-eagerness from a mile away. It'll make her think less of you."

"I'm not—"

"And for the record, I don't recall you being this excited to meet her during Legacy Day. Just act like you did then."

Varian frowned. "Do you also *not* recall how stressed and consumed by terror I was that day?"

"Yeah. That's the appropriate response to being around my mom," Hugo said. Varian looked a little horrified, so Hugo pretended to chuckle like he was joking. His roommate seemed to relax.

As they took their seats, Hugo's eyes remained fixed on the Sorcerer. She didn't even spare him a glance. He wasn't surprised. He wasn't upset.

The lecture began as it always did with her. No greeting, no nothing. Straight to business.

The lectures to the Ever After High students were distinct from those which Hugo received growing up. First off, these ones were optional; extra credit opportunities for those in magic-related classes. That motivated a lot of students to attend. Even those outside of those classes, with an interest in magic, tended to pop in from time to time. Second, these lectures were less of Don staring over shoulders, calling out every little flaw and potential mishap (as she did with Hugo), and more of her spouting information, emotionless.

That alone filled Hugo with a sense of pride. *He* got real knowledge from Don; knowledge she chose to share. He got a reaction from her, at least. Even if it was usually a critique, it came from a place of caring. She cared whether he was improving or not. Just like she cared whether or not he was caught for stealing. Even though he was replaceable, being adopted, she cared.

In contrast, Don didn't give a single shit whether the students at his school improved in the slightest. They weren't replaceable. Born into their destinies, they got handed everything. Hugo almost chuckled, imagining Don sneering at the thought. In her lectures, these students got the scraps of her knowledge, which she wouldn't even be dishing out in the first place if she wasn't basically forced to do so for the sake of her research.

Today's lecture was on conjuring winds, especially weather-like ones. Whirlwinds, tornados, etc. Nothing quite as advanced as hurricanes, but still moderately difficult stuff. To know how to summon them was the first step to knowing how to stop one. Of course, Don didn't think anyone in the room was powerful enough to actually attempt that, but she wasn't going to degrade herself by re-explaining the basics of magic. She was too qualified for that. So, weather spells.

Oblivious to this condescension, Varian was all but immersed in the lecture. He looked completely enraptured, soaking up every bit of information. For Hugo, it was good to see his roommate acting like himself again. While he obviously preferred getting as many of Dorthoth's notes decoded as soon as possible, the burnt-out version of Varian wasn't nearly as amusing as the usual Varian. Also, maybe, Hugo was just glad to see that signing the Storybook of Legends didn't leave his sorta friend permanently depressed. He deserved peace of mind, if nothing else. Happiness was a good look on him.

"Hugo?" Nuru whispered. "Earth to Hugo?"

He turned to her. "What?"

"You were staring at Varian. For a while."

"Oh," Hugo said.

Nuru tapped her foot, like she was expecting him to explain himself. When no words came, she simply hummed and ignored him once more.

From there, the lecture went without a hitch.

Then, about three quarters of the way through, Don's mirrorphone buzzed on her desk. She glanced down at it, mid-sentence. Her words didn't falter, but Hugo could see her eyes widen ever so

slightly. A minute later, Don set down the chalk piece in her hand, picked up the device, and turned to the door.

“We’ll be taking a short break,” Don said, already on her way out.

The surrounding students murmured amongst themselves, confused. Hugo paid them no mind, as casually as possible rushing out to find the Sorcerer. He found her out in the hall, speaking harshly on the phone. When she saw Hugo, she mumbled something about calling back in a minute.

“A situation’s arisen that I need to deal with,” Don said.

“What about the lecture?” Hugo asked. Varian would probably be disappointed by the abrupt end.

Donella rolled her eyes. “Well, if it matters that much to you, then you can cover the rest of the lecture for me.”

Hugo froze. “Me? I’m not sure—”

Don gave him a look, shutting him up. Hugo stood a little straighter.

“It’s not that complicated,” Donella said, like the words were beneath her to have to say. “Just walk them through a demonstration of the mini tornado spell or something. Don’t act so meek. Not like you have any backfires to your magic to worry about.”

Right. Hugo was adopted. No generational flaws with his family magic for him. Yippee.

Then Donella turned and walked away, muttering that she’d be back soon, leaving Hugo on his own.

Hugo stood there for a long moment. In some way, he felt left out. He wanted to be by her side, helping her with whatever the problem was. That was his destiny wasn’t it? To be her apprentice. Then again, in another way, wasn’t that what she just tasked him with doing?

“Hey,” Varian said, appearing out of nowhere (or maybe Hugo was too caught up in his thoughts to notice). The freckled student glanced around, clearly looking for the Sorcerer. “What’s going on?”

Hugo sighed, leaning against the row of hallway lockers. “What’s going on? My mom just bailed. She left me in charge.”

“Ha,” Varian said. “That’s a good one.”

“Not a joke, Goggles,” Hugo said.

There was a long silence, engineered by both roommates, as Varian took in that information. He seemed to be inspecting the blond’s face, looking for some hint of humor. When he inevitably found none, he spoke again.

“Why?” Varian asked, stretching the word out in an almost terrified whisper.

Drama queen. Hugo snorted. “Geez, don’t act so happy for me.”

“You don’t seem very happy yourself,” Varian pointed out, joining him in leaning against the lockers.

Hugo squirmed internally, not loving his feelings being seen through so fast. “I’m thrilled,” he said, as if trying to speak it into existence. “Why? Do I not seem thrilled?”

“I mean, you haven’t made a single joke about getting to show off and be better than me yet. It’s already been a full 100 seconds. Should I call an ambulance? Is this a medical emergency?”

“You wound me,” Hugo held the back of his hand to his forehead, as if about to faint.

“Nah,” Varian said. “I couldn’t even if I tried.”

“Saying you’re trying?” Hugo smirked.

“In your dreams.”

“You saying I should dream about you?”

Right then, Nuru walked past them. Under her breath, Hugo vaguely heard her mutter something that sounded suspiciously like “Get a room.” The blond was sure he’d misheard her. Luckily for his sudden flusteredness, Hugo didn’t have to continue the conversation. Varian changed the subject, eyes focused on the ground.

“What’s the plan, then?”

“She said to walk everyone through their own attempts. I’ll just have everyone make mini tornados in their hands or something.”

“Cool, cool,” Varian said. “Mind excusing me from doing that?”

Hugo did a double take. “You?! Excusing yourself from using magic? Now *that* is a medical emergency.”

“I’m not being serious,” Varian laughed, though his voice was a little unsure, even as he struggled not to laugh even harder at Hugo’s slack jawed expression. “Then again, maybe I actually shouldn’t. People destined to be Dorothy don’t have great luck around tornados.”

“These are mini tornados, farm boy. I think you’ll live.”

Varian shot him a look. “I’m serious. One time, when my mom was my age, a tornado blew through our farm and it carried her halfway to the next town. This was *before* she even signed the Storybook! I mean, the odds of that are incredible.”

“Huh,” Hugo said. “That kinda sounds like bookmark magic.”

“What?” Varian asked, head tilted.

Hugo froze. *Right. Not common knowledge.* “It’s nothing. Just something that happens to people with the same magic used over and over in their families. So, mostly to people with destinies involving magic. It probably isn’t the same thing that your mom talked about.”

Varian raised an eyebrow at his roommate. Hugo, out of habit, was about to redirect the conversation. But Varian already knew he was adopted, so there was really no reason to hide the existence of generational magical flaws (and Hugo’s own lack of one).

“Generational magical flaws and quirks. But that’s a hell of a mouthful, so Don just calls them ‘bookmarks’.”

Thanks to generations of magic users who focused on the same kinds of spells, or kept being affected by the same curses, then had kids who did the same thing, the EAH students with magic-related destinies were basically all saddled with a fatal flaw attached to it. The examples Hugo knew of were obvious. Raven Queen, daughter of the Evil Queen, couldn’t use magic for good without it backfiring. Or Hopper Croakington, son of the Frog Prince, his predecessors being continuously cursed to turn into frogs over the generations made Hopper turn into one when he lost his cool, even though he himself hadn’t been cursed to be a frog yet. Of course, for other magic students it was subtler than that, but each of the students destined to use or be affected by magic still had those bookmarks.

Donella, the only authority Hugo needed to hear it from to know it was true, told Hugo all about why it occurred. Over the generations, the magic they used/got cursed by started to stick to them, and get passed down to their children. Consequently showing that their destiny was passed from bio-parent to bio-child. No adoption. She called these generational magical flaws/quirks ‘bookmarks’ because they “mark or indicate a person’s place in a magical family.”

But, again, this was not common knowledge. Essentially only those familiar with how magic worked and the destinies at Ever After High put the dots together. Thanks to this, Hugo was sure that his professors held private suspicions of him being adopted; they’d seen him perform all sorts of magic, even on brooms, mops, or water (a notorious fatal flaw for Sorcerer’s Apprentices of the past) without it backfiring. Hugo’s own lack of any bookmarks to his magic, as was usually the case for Sorcerer’s Apprentices (destined to make disastrous mistakes with magic, their bookmark was that their magic refused to listen to them), set him apart. That was most definitely how Grimm figured it out.

Don said once that Headmaster Grimm privately called it “Proof that these successors were born to take up their destiny. Even before signing the book, these successors show exactly who they are meant to be. Destinies are meant to be passed from parent to child. Not an adopter to adoptee.” Apparently, he’d found out Hugo was adopted and lectured her all about this. Characteristically, Donella told him he could shove it. She called it nothing more than the magical equivalent of radiation poisoning affecting a person’s DNA. All blood and tissue, nothing to do with the Storybook.

Although, it didn’t exactly inspire confidence in Hugo to know that for most of these families with destined passed down, there hadn’t been any adoption. He was a broken link in the chain, without any assurance that the Storybook would accept him. But Donella told him, in that same conversation, that she wasn’t worried.

Magic was weird, but if it made sense to Don, then who was Hugo to protest?

“That doesn’t make sense,” Varian frowned. “I don’t even have a magical destiny. Why would I have a bookmark like that.”

“Yeah,” Hugo agreed. “Which is why I highly doubt your tornado unluckiness is a bookmark at all. Probably just you and your mom being superstitious.”

“She wasn’t superstitious. Neither am I.”

“Then stop talking like you are. But I guess you can sit out if you want,” Hugo then pretended to cry. “But I’d surely be heartbroken if you did.”

Varian offered no comeback to the jab (which totally didn’t disappoint Hugo or anything). His mind was still on the idea of these supposed bookmarks. “I’m serious, that doesn’t seem right. Magic isn’t supposed to affect people like that, even over long periods of time or generations. Unless it’s a curse of some kind.”

Hugo waved his roommate away, half listening. “Well, that’s how it is. We magic types definitely have it the worst. It really only affects us, or,” Hugo’s brow furrowed. “Those magic types. Not me,” Hugo said, voice suddenly much quieter. “Adopted and all.”

“Mhm,” Varian hummed, unphased. “You know, all of this sounds like stuff my mom would’ve written about.”

“I’m not so sure,” Hugo said. “This isn’t actually connected to *destiny*. The Storybook doesn’t cause it. It’s more of a side effect of all the magic people used over the years.”

Varian held his chin, already back in his own head. “If it’s something that magical people *with destinies* deal with, then it’s definitely in the notes. Guess I’ll keep an eye out for it.”

“Yeah, do that,” Hugo said, noncommittal. Don told him all there was to know about it. Hugo highly doubted Ulla would know more than Don in this instance. Especially since the Sorcerer herself was helping with the research! If bookmarks were mentioned, it would just be a repeat of what Don said.

Speaking of what Don said, Hugo glanced at the door to the lecture hall. The break had gone on long enough.

“Guess I better get in there,” Hugo said, without much (if any) enthusiasm.

“Hugo?” Varian seemed to examine him, searching for the source of his reluctance. When he couldn’t find it, he spoke again. “Listen.” he took his hand, just before he walked away. Hugo paused. At that moment, he felt like there was nothing more he wanted than to listen to Varian. That was a very weird feeling.

“You’re the Sorcerer’s Apprentice,” Varian said, like it was obvious and unquestionable. “Just do your thing.”

Something about Varian saying it made all of Hugo’s worry disappear. The feeling struck him as all too similar to when he did magic. Hugo shook himself out of his stupor. He reminded himself that this task wasn’t something to dread. It was an opportunity. The chance to inch closer to fully regaining Donella’s confidence in him as her successor. It was an easy task too! Just leading some magic enthusiasts through a small spell. Easy peasy.

Once back in the lecture hall, Varian returned to his seat and Hugo remained up front. He briefly explained that the Sorcerer needed to run out “on an urgent matter” and that he’d be walking everyone through the rest of the lecture.

“Right then,” Hugo kept his back straight as he spoke. “I guess let’s get started.”

Hugo himself didn’t do a demonstration, per say. He listed out the steps to summoning a mini tornado, no bigger than the size of a person’s hand. As the students around him attempted the spell,

he also re-explained the steps to reversing it. That part was arguably easier than the summoning itself, for these mini tornados at least. Trying to reverse any larger kind of weather would have been impossible for all these beginners.

Eventually, everyone was busy with their own attempts. Hugo found himself running around answering individual questions. He had to admit, it wasn't half bad being the one helping people, rather than just helping Don.

Once all the questions were answered, and everyone was giving the reversal spells a shot, Hugo made his way back to the front. He noticed that Varian was wrapped up in more note taking, rather than any attempts at the spell.

"You seriously not going to try it?" Hugo asked, hand on Varian's desk.

Varian didn't look up at him. "Not right now. The Sorcerer talks too fast. I need to write down everything she said before I forget it."

"Oh give me a break," Hugo sighed. "Is this about the bookmark thing?"

Varian shrugged.

Hugo shook his head. "Seriously, you don't have a magical flaw. Your family doesn't even use magic, and isn't exactly affected by it longterm like with a curse or something. Only those with magical families and destinies do."

"Better safe than sorry," Varian said.

"Okay," Hugo rolled his eyes. "I'm about to prove to you that you're being silly."

"You don't have to do that," Varian said, deadpan, blue eyes finally meeting his green ones.

"I know," Hugo smirked. "I'm such a sweetheart, aren't I?" He took Varian's hand. The shorter student's eyes widened for a moment. Hugo winced. "Sorry, I should've asked before," he gestured. "Just open your palm okay?"

Varian nodded. His expression was strangely vacant, like his mind was elsewhere. Still, he held out his palm. Hugo placed his own right hand under Varian's palm and his left on top. Then, with his left hand he summoned his own mini tornado. It was the same as everyone else's, just done quicker. It spun in Varian's palm. The shorter student watched it carefully, as if waiting for it to toss him to the other end of the room. Yet, nothing happened.

"See?" Hugo nodded, perhaps a little self-congratulatory. "Told you so."

Varian scoffed. "This doesn't prove anything. It probably only happens with real tornados anyway."

"Uh huh," Hugo nodded. "Very scientific observation. Keep telling yourself that."

"Okay Mr. Sorcerer's Apprentice," Varian said. "Thanks for being *so* smart."

"You're welcome," he smirked. "It's good to be appreciated."

Then, Varian smiled. He smiled in a way that said he knew he was wrong but didn't want to admit it. Maybe it was all this talk of magic getting to Hugo's head, but lately when he saw his roommate smiled it felt like the air around him was humming. No, not humming. It was nicer than that. It was —

Hugo was still holding Varian's hand.

"I'll just," Hugo frantically moved the tornado into his own hand, backing away. Varian blinked, stupid big blue eyes softening as he looked at Hugo. The blond turned his gaze to the mini tornado, still spinning in his own palm now. Then the wind inside it began to pick up. Faster and faster it spun.

Odd. he thought, confused rather than unpanicked. *Better reverse the spell now.* Right as he finished that thought, suddenly, the wind expanded, lashing out at him, knocking him off his feet. From the floor, he vaguely heard the other students' voices raising in alarm, both at his state and from the wind hitting them too.

Before Hugo could pull himself off the ground, a hand was on his arm, helping him up. Varian was suddenly by his side, wide eyed and concerned.

"Is your supposed bookmark supposed to do that to tornados?" Hugo whispered.

"Uh," Varian started. "Not to my knowledge."

Hugo looked around, searching for where the mini tornado (now a strong gust of wind) went. The reversal spell was already on the tip of his tongue. But his throat ran dry as he took in the sight above him. It wasn't simply a strong wind now. Up at the ceiling, clouds were forming.

A simple tornado spell wasn't supposed to do that.

Hugo scrambled to say the reversal spell. The words came out garbled and unclear. The storm he'd unleashed only grew worse. The clouds above suddenly changed hue from gray to almost black. The wind became stronger. Then the rain started pouring.

This wasn't a tornado. This was a storm.

"Everyone out!" Varian's voice shouted up to the seats. The students didn't need to be told twice, as most of them were already on their feet, running for the door. Hugo almost didn't notice Varian leaving with the rest of the students, ushering them out. Hugo couldn't spare any of them a thought. Not even a glance. All his focus on the weather around him.

Hugo tried again to say the reversal spell, but his voice seemed drowned out by the crashing of rain. Yet, Hugo kept shouting. Over and over he said the reversal spell. *I must be saying it wrong.* But he wasn't. *Maybe I need to use my hands, channel magic through them.* But he didn't need to. He never had. Even now it didn't make a difference. He knew this spell, learned it before and memorized it like a million others Donella insisted. He didn't know what was wrong. *Varian.* Hugo thought, frantic. *What if Varian did have a bookmark? What if this was the effects of Dorothy being near a tornado, even a mini one?* But that couldn't be it either. Even if Varian's supposed bookmark, which he shouldn't even have, initially caused this, it shouldn't affect Hugo's own magic in the slightest. That wasn't how it worked. Nothing was making sense about any of this.

What am I doing wrong? Simple and straightforward, his magic seemed determined not to listen.

The storm was so monstrous by this point that Hugo could barely see a few centimeters in front of his face.

It's only going to get worse. He thought as the wind and rain pushed him around and down and nearly to his knees.

It's going to stretch beyond this stupid lecture hall. If he let it, this storm could fill the whole school.

I needed to find Donella. She could help. But directions escaped Hugo, as he found himself unable to locate the door. His glasses were drenched and useless.

The constant movement of the water was nauseating. Every breath he took, he risked inhaling more and more water as he struggled to breathe in the indoor downpour. He reached out, arms still tired and barely resisting the gravity of the rain, for anything to hold onto. His hands came up empty.

A strong gust of wind knocked into him. He lost his footing, hitting the ground with a thud. The hard floor of the lecture hall was flooded and still flooding. He tried to pick himself back up, all the while attempting to say the reversal spell. Hugo struggled to keep his eyes open. There was nothing to see, but to fall unconscious now, on the flooding floor would certainly lead to him drowning. Even in his state, he knew to stay awake. Stay awake.

Donella will come and save me.

Then another thought came all at once, cutting through everything else. Time seemed to slow down around Hugo as another reality entered his mind: One where Donella didn't come to get him. He was replaceable. He was failing her. He was failing her more than ever these days. Not just now, in this storm he still didn't know how he'd created. He failed her by getting caught stealing. He failed her by losing focus. He failed her by being conflicted, scared to lie to a friend. Don did everything for him, and he only ever got in his own way. There was no guarantee Donella would save him. He was replaceable. Hugo lived his whole life without guarantees of anything. Why should that change now? Hugo once again tried to pick himself off the floor. His head felt light and heavy at the same time. He'd be lucky if he got out of here with only a concussion. Then again, he'd be lucky to get out of here at all. His head felt light—

Light.

His eyes caught a line of light. Like a thread. A voice in that direction shouted something, maybe a name. It almost sounded like *Hugo*. Then, that voice shouted a command of some kind. *Was that the reversal spell?* Suddenly, the rain slowed down. The winds went quiet. Hugo gasped and took in the air. The storm was over, and there stood Varian with his homemade glowing thread tied around his wrist leading out the door. He moved his goggles from his freckled face, frantically looking around for something. When his eyes found Hugo he all but ran to him. Hugo barely had a moment to sit himself up before Varian was grabbing his face.

“Are you okay?” Varian asked, catching his breath. Hugo didn't have the energy to answer or even poke fun at him for being worried (or for holding his face which Hugo was not thinking about). For some reason, his brain's focus immediately went to Varian's hair, wet and sticking against his forehead.

“You stopped the storm,” Hugo said, half questioning, half relieved, and maybe a little impressed.

“Yeah,” Varian said. He then noticed he was still holding his roommate’s face and let go. A relieved smile bloomed on his face, not a hint of smugness in sight. “I did. Not like I had much of a choice. I don’t think anyone saw me, so I hope I’m not in trouble for using magic outside of class. Everyone’s safe, still. They’re—”

“How did you do that?” Hugo asked, still focused on Varian stopping the storm.

“The Sorcerer,” Varian started. “She mentioned how to do it during the lecture. Definitely harder than reversing a mini tornado.”

“And this your first time actually doing that?”

Varian shrugged. He let out a small chuckle.

You’re amazing. The words spotted on the tip of Hugo’s tongue. The sight behind Varian’s head made his mouth go completely dry.

Donella. Wide eyed, bewildered, and from the look on her face she was in a state of silent fury.

Oh no.

“Of all the blunders you’ve had, of all the fuck ups, never have I seen one this flashy,” Donella said. Hugo could practically hear her mask of stone cracking, chipping away with every word. She was fuming.

Hugo sat on the spare chair in Don’s office. A blanket she’d summoned wrapped around him. He still wore the clothes he’d had on in the room-sized hurricane he caused. After she’d made sure everyone was safe and sent them all away, Donella wasted no time dragging Hugo back to her office for a chat. Then again, chat wasn’t the right word. More of a scolding than anything else.

“It wasn’t my fault,” Hugo said, but was cut off.

“Oh, this just keeps getting better.” She looked close to laughter, although there was no joy in her tone. “An excuse like that is beneath you.”

“I’m serious,” the blond insisted, voice bordering on desperate. “It just happened. It was almost like,” Hugo’s throat ran dry. There was a strange pressure building behind his eyes, as if the weight of his thoughts was so grand it could actually physically crack open his skull. “Like a bookmark. Like I’d have if I was your biological son.” *Like I’d have if I was irreplaceable.*

Donella didn’t move. Hugo didn’t dare move either.

“Cast the spell.”

Hugo barely breathed. “What?”

Donella stared through him. “Cast the tornado spell again.”

Despite all the fear he felt at her words, Hugo did as he was told. He summoned a small tornado in his hand. A moment passed. Nothing went wrong. Another moment. Nothing. Then another, then

another. Then the wind in his palm lashed out. Wisps of clouds began to form. Donella all but shouted the reversal spell. The clouds and winds disappeared.

Hugo didn't have a chance to speak.

"Again," Donella said.

He did the spell again. The same events occurred. Then again. Then again. Then, she made him try other spells. Some weather related, others similarly complex, some much simpler. Most went very, very wrong. Donella managed to stop every spell that threatened to get out of hand, but that didn't make Hugo feel any better. His magic was acting exactly like the magic of every other Sorcerer's Apprentice before him. Acting how he never expected his own to act since he was adopted. And yet here he was, magic acting like shit.

By the end of these tests, hours of tests, Hugo's head felt heavy. He felt as though he could pass out right there, standing up. He almost did. Levitations and small summonings (the drying spell he used to warm himself up worked fine) seemed to be all he could do without it going horribly. His brain barely registered Don backing away from him until he heard her collapse into her chair. She must have seen the exhaustion on his face. She paused, staring back at him.

"We can't be sure what this is," Donella said.

Without thinking, Hugo spoke. "What? Don. If this issue with my magic— if I— it's—" He was so tired, and more than a little humiliated. Don's disappointment couldn't possibly get any worse, so he trucked forward. "If it acts like a duck, sounds like a duck, looks like a duck, and walks like a duck, maybe it's a duck."

Donella's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"What if this is a Sorcerer's Apprentice bookmark?"

"It's not."

"But what if it is?"

"I already told you, it's not that." Don said, her tone was so familiarly harsh. "You're not my—" she stopped herself. The silence sliced through Hugo's very being as though with a knife. All stony and calm.

"I'm not your..." Hugo asked. "I'm not your what?"

Donella stared back at him with an expression he'd seen a million times before from her. It was care. In Hugo's mind, it had to be care. To consider it anything else would be too painful. Then she turned away. "You don't have those kinds of flaws," she said. "It's not possible. You know that." She ran a hand over her forehead. "My best guess is that this is all you. You fucked up, as you've been doing so very frequently these days. Perhaps this is just your magic's way of finally making you see how much of a failure you're letting yourself become."

Hugo's eyes burned a hole in the floor. Maybe she was right.

And yet, Varian's skepticism rudely returned to the forefront of his mind. Foundationless, purely hypothetical skepticism. Maybe bookmarks didn't work the way he'd been told?

“But what if—”

“Why did I choose you?” Donella said, still not looking at him. There was a small window in her office, with a trickle of sunset light fading through it. Her eyes stayed on it.

“Are you asking *me* ?” Hugo had the courage to say, biting at the hand that feeds. When Donella didn’t answer, he continued. “You chose me because you needed a successor.”

“Yes,” Donella said. “But why *you* ?”

Hugo steadied himself.

“Hugo,” Donella said, fast as lightning. Hugo practically heard thunder in the echo of her voice. She stood from her chair, approaching him. Hugo barely stopped himself from moving backward.

“Why did I choose *you* ?”

“I—” Hugo swallowed. “I don’t—”

“No, you don’t get it, do you?” Donella continued to stalk towards him. “Let me be clear: you are here because I don’t have a *real* successor. I didn’t want a real successor, with all the usual flaws of a Sorcerer’s Apprentice, such as terrible magic. Yet, the position needed to be filled.”

Don kept coming closer to him until she stood just outside his personal space. “You, orphaned, alone, no family history to weigh you down, had none of those flaws. I could have picked anyone just like you. I could’ve done so ten years ago, and I could do so now. We both know there’s no shortage of neglected downtrodden in the world. But I chose you. The Storybook will accept you only because there is no other option presented to it. Until you sign the Storybook of Legends, you have no connection to your destiny; and you certainly don’t have a bookmark.” Don said, words biting like an animal backed into a corner.

Then, she took a breath. “Do I speak lies? Have I ever been wrong before?” Don asked.

“No,” Hugo responded.

“Well then,” Don spat out. “You’d be an idiot and start thinking that now, after everything I’ve done for you.”

Hugo stared intently back at Don, not daring to avert his gaze. “I know.”

“Do you?” Donella’s eyes, still as stones bore through him. “Then let me ask you again: Why did I choose *you* ?”

“Because I happened to be there,” Hugo said. “Because I was lucky.”

Donella let out the breath he didn’t know she’d been holding. She patted the side of his face. Hugo nearly recoiled. In the same breath, she turned away from him. Returning to her chair with an air of relief.

“Go. Do the one job I’ve given you. Report any new findings in Dorothy’s notes. Goodness knows I can’t trust you with anything else right now,” Donella sighed, done with the conversation.

Hugo didn’t say another word. If Donella said that this was the way it was, despite everything he’d just seen, who was Hugo to protest?

After the disaster that was today's lecture, it didn't go unnoticed by Varian that Hugo didn't return to their dorm. The first hour was reasonable. The second hour was less reasonable. The third was odd. The fourth? Was he really *still* talking to his mom?

As he sat at his desk, trying to work to pass the time (and because he didn't want to fall behind in Magicology), Olivia crawled onto Varian's hand. Oh. He'd been tapping his desk. It probably annoyed her.

"Sorry," he said to the robotic mouse.

Liv stared up at him, her head tipped as if in a question. She almost looked sad.

Then again, maybe Varian was projecting.

The dorm door opened. Varian whipped around to see Hugo walk in, startled by the state he was in. He looked despondent. Varian watched as his roommate walked to his half of the room and dropped himself onto his bed. Olivia scrambled off Varian's desk. She climbed up to her owner, currently laying face down (glasses in one hand) and motionless. She tried to snuggle herself against his face, only to be gently moved away by Hugo's hand.

Varian stood from his desk chair, but quickly found himself frozen, unsure how to proceed. He'd never seen Hugo so unresponsive. Angry? Sure, he'd seen that. Upset? A few times, Legacy Day being one of them. But this? This pitiful creature that turns away even from his favorite mechanical creation? That wasn't the Hugo that Varian respected. That wasn't the Hugo that Varian liked. Yeah. Liked. That was a good word for it.

An idea came to him. He started up the coffee/hot chocolate maker, placing one of his roommate's mugs under the machine. Once it was filled, Varian made his way to the other side of the room. Quiet, as though trying not to startle the blond, Varian sat on his bed. He made sure to keep the cup in his hand steady.

Hugo turned his head slightly, one eye staring up at him. "Goggles. That's my mug."

"Duh," Varian said, trying to hand the mug over.

Hugo stared for a few moments longer, before he sat up and took the mug from his roommate's hand. For a long minute, the silence continued.

Comfort the dumbass. Varian shook himself from his thoughts.

"Seriously, are you oka—"

"I think you're gonna have to find a new rival," Hugo said. Varian blinked. "Rival?" he asked, but Hugo continued as if he hadn't heard him. "Am I okay? Was that your question? Good question. Let's review: My mom is mad at me, I *still* haven't signed the Storybook of Legends, and now my magic is fucking up like crazy. So, you should find a new rival."

"You're not my rival—"

"Not anymore!" Hugo half-laughed. It was a joyless noise.

“I mean,” Varian crossed his arms. “You’re not *just* my rival. You’re my friend.”

“Am I?” Hugo said.

Varian looked back at him. “Yes.”

Hugo was nothing less than a deer in headlights. It occurred to Varian, suddenly, that he looked guilty. But that couldn't be right. What did Hugo have to be guilty about? Varian tried to remind himself that Hugo wasn't used to having friends. That was clearly what all this talk of not being real friends was about. Classic self destructive tendencies. Varian knew them well, having been there himself once upon a time.

“Your magic will be fine,” Varian said.

“You don't know that. Not even Don knows why my magic is acting this way.”

What the hell did his mom say to him? Varian thought. “The Sorcerer doesn't know everything,” Varian said. Hugo laughed, despite the statement not being a joke. “I mean it,” Varian continued. “Who knows? Maybe my mom's notes will have the answer. Or, better yet, we'll find it ourselves.”

Hugo nodded along, sipping at his hot chocolate, looking unconvinced. Then, Olivia returned to his side, nudging his hand. He patted her head. Varian sighed, content that he was acting at least a little like himself again. A lover of mechanics, despite himself.

Then, Ruddiger jumped onto the bed, startling poor Olivia, who scurried off of the blond. The raccoon practically ran through Hugo to get to the mouse, causing him to spill the mug over his bed.

“Yep. That's how my day would end,” Hugo huffed. He unceremoniously shoved Varian off the bed as he got to work collecting all the blankets and sheets. The shorter student didn't even think to be mad. His first thought was helping him out. To be honest, the surprise on Hugo's face when he noticed his roommate back at his side was more than enough to be pleased about.

After dumping the sheets into the laundry basket, Hugo hesitated before levitating them. Slowly, he held out his hand to do so. It was a simple spell. The basket followed in his wake, without issue. Varian followed too.

“You have laundry to do too?” Hugo asked, not quite looking at him.

“Nah,” Varian said. “I just want to walk with you.”

“You don't have to do that.”

“I know,” Varian said, before mimicking Hugo's voice “I'm such a sweetheart, aren't I?”

Hugo scoffed in annoyance, but his grin gave him away. “Maybe it's better if you come along with some laundry. You still stink of rain.”

Varian's face went red. “Look who's talking! You're still wearing the clothes you had on during the storm, your highness.”

“Well,” Hugo held his head high. “Maybe I’m picking up some bad habits from my roommate, farm boy.”

“I changed into pajamas!”

They bickered like this all the way to the laundry room. And in the laundry room. And on their way back to their room to actually get Varian’s shit (and throw Hugo’s storm-smelling outfit in with the load).

They spent most the night in the laundry room, in comfortable pajamas. It was nothing spectacular or magical, but to Varian it was really nice. From the look on Hugo’s face, Varian could tell he was at ease too. His (mostly smug) smile was proof of that.

“Everyday I ask myself what horrible thing I did to get stuck with you,” Hugo said on their way back to the dorms.

Varian nudged him, playfully annoyed. “Guess you’re just lucky.”

For just a second, he saw Hugo’s expression fall. In that brief span of time, he got the strangest feeling that the blond had something to say to him. Something important.

Then it was gone, replaced once more with a look of ease.

Varian chose not to ask about that.

A few days later, with more notes decoded, Hugo returned to Donella’s office.

Hugo knocked. No answer. He cracked open the door. There Donella stood with the Storybook of Legends before her. Hugo walked into the room. Don glanced at him. She allowed the spell showing her the Sotrybook’s magical essence to fully dissipate from the air. It did so with a flash, like a rubber band that’s been pulled too far, snapping back. With the weight of the spell off her she stumbled, but didn’t fall.

Hugo didn’t move from where he stood, feet planted firm.

“Do you have anything to report?”

There was no hint of apology in her voice. No remnants of yesterday’s long conversation. That was to be expected. Yet, for the first time, that indifference left Hugo with the taste of bile in his mouth; bile, with a hint of hot chocolate. It made him pause. It almost deterred him. Then he swallowed his pride and spoke.

“Yes.”

And Hugo did. After all, he had a new normal to adjust to. He would adjust. He would. At least, he would keep telling himself that.

Guys. Crazy thought here. I don't think Hugo's doing okay.

Hope you enjoyed the new chapter! This one has been in the works for a while, and I'm very happy with how it came out.

Once again THANK YOU to my friend @levlathan for all the help with this chapter!!

Okay semi-serious time, so listen up. I'm dealing with school and family madness, so there's a good chance that this fic will need to be put on the back burner until my life calms down. From now until May/June I am going to be very very busy, so an unofficial hiatus may occur until then.

This fic WILL update and (eventually) reach the ending I have in mind, that is for certain. But, in the meantime, please don't panic if I go radio silent during the previously mentioned period of time.

As always, remember to take care of yourself, talk to the people you love, and GO DRINK SOME WATER!!!!

Setting the Stage

Chapter Summary

As Hugo deals with his newest problems (not), Varian struggles to help his friend. A strange session of Magicology class provides an unexpected opportunity to alleviate some of the strain.

Chapter Notes

I LIVE!!! Today I have returned and brought to you a new chapter of my fic. I hope you enjoy the new (Varian-centric) chapter! Have fun with Hugo's flop era :D

Also, this chapter has an unofficial song attached to it in my brain. "We Are the People" by Empire Of The Sun.

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Today, Hugo fought bubbles. Tomorrow, who knows? Probably something worse.

"Hey, woah, why is it doing that?" The student next to him in Chemythstry (Hugo hadn't cared to learn his name) fretted as the concoction they'd tried to create began to bubble. It was not supposed to bubble. It was a simple aroma potion, on the level of a regular assignment in Chemythstry. It'd been going well, thus far. Hugo had added all the ingredients mechanically and without disaster befalling them. The final touch was to stir it with the help of a cool temperature spell, which Hugo volunteered to add. His assignment partner had blundered it for a whole minute, despite how simple it was. Hugo thought it was simple enough to do by himself, even in his state. Spoiler: it wasn't. The moment he used his own magic, the potion began to bubble as though it'd been put over a puddle of lava. "Shut it down!" The student urged.

"I'm trying." Hugo would've said. Would've. Before he could, the solution burst out of the glass vial. Bubbles filled the air, the aisles, the seats, every which way. Predictably, people gawked and cringed and even laughed. Professor Rumpelstiltskin didn't, but when did he ever? Randos, all of them. Hugo didn't care what they thought of him.

So, yeah, this curse hadn't magically cured itself overnight like a cold. Nor had it cured itself yesterday, or the day before, or the day before that. Because at this point why would Hugo expect anything good from the universe? His magic? Sucked now. Donella wasn't asking him to steal things for her, she wasn't asking about his grades anymore, she wasn't responding to his texts unless she texted him herself, and on top of everything else, thanks to this stupid sudden plague on his soul, the one thing she did ask him to do, keep reporting on Ulla's research, was in jeopardy. There was no way that it wasn't.

Hugo dared to look back at his roommate. Varian stared at him with his stupid big blue eyes. There were a lot of bubbles in his hair. Hugo felt nauseous.

Varian and Hugo had a good dynamic. Hugo was good at magic. Varian was slightly less good at magic (Hugo's totally truthful opinion) and they were rivals. Sure, also friends now, but the important part of that friendship was that Hugo was competent, cool, and not riddled with cursed magic that took everything from zero to a hundred before Hugo could think of what to do next. With this curse hanging over his mind, being close to Varian was a practice in handling terror. He could avoid him in class, keep his distance so that poor Goggles didn't get in the crossfire. But outside of class, when they'd walk the same path (he'd never been so upset that the two of them had nearly the same schedule), he was all but shoulder to shoulder with his roommate. Shoulder to shoulder with the last thing he needed to do right.

He pities you. Hugo thought during these transition periods, during these days. For all your cleverness, you can't show it off. He thinks you are useless. I mean, makes sense. Who even is Hugo Cast if he can't do anything right?

"So," Varian started. Hugo tried to stop himself from tensing up. He failed. "Did you see how upset Rumpelstiltskin looked that everyone got A's on that written exam?" He sounded normal. As if nothing was wrong. It was enough to trick Hugo's brain for a bit.

"Oh my god, yes," Hugo fell into conversation, tension momentarily forgotten. "Bitter as hell. I'm guessing he's gonna be like that all week." A smirk was already forming on his face. "But, thankfully, I can handle a little bitterness. I mean, I live with you don't I?"

"I am not bitter," Varian said, before murmuring just under his breath. "Anymore."

"What was that, Goggles?" Hugo said, leaning into his personal space, hand around his ear, smiling like a Cheshire cat. "Didn't catch that."

"Shut up."

"I most certainly will not."

Varian pouted at that, but made no perceptible sign that he wanted to leave the conversation.

Wow. Okay maybe he's a little stupid himself. That's gotta be why he's so unbothered. Hugo thought. Or he's just stringing you along out of pity. Waiting for the moment to drop you.

And sure, Hugo had thought that of Varian way back during their rivalry, but that was just nerves. And yes, he even thought it when Varian came back to school with his mother's research, but that was guilt about spying on him, which he'd totally gotten over now. This, however, was based on irrefutable evidence. All he could now was help with the notes. But even that felt futile.

It's just a matter of time.

Hugo ate that thought. He let it into his system and kept it there. And he waited. And waited. And now this was just becoming cruel, making him wait like this. Somehow, all his failings hadn't been the final push for it to happen.

Still, Hugo was sure it would, eventually. He needed the theory to be tested; get it over with. Somehow. Later. He still had to get through Magicology. Maybe after that he'd be dropped.

In times of confusion or concern, Varian relied on what he loved: science. Well, science, alchemy, and magic. Whichever was best suited to the situation. He tested, he watched, he listened, he sought out results, as he would with his favorite fields of study.

For example: the leaves on the trees had entirely changed to their autumn colors, and the wind was turning cold. Varian needed a new coat.

Another example: his roommate, Hugo, and his newfound difficulties with magic.

In Science & Sorcery class, any complex spells he tried would result in disaster. Either the professor or another student (often Varian himself) would be the one to cancel out the effects. The most he could manage without something terrible happening were levitations and simple summonings of objects (which was basically just levitation too). Even when he and the other students were offered wands and/or staff to use, items imbued with magic but which required the user to channel their own magic into them, Hugo's spells would, excuse the pun, spell disaster. Varian didn't think he'd ever see a magic staff go up in flames before, but there's a first time for everything.

In Chemystery, any potions or concoctions that were brewed with the help of magic spells would go up in smoke, or flames, or some other form of matter that ended badly. Oddly enough, the potions that required no spells, merely the ingredients and procedures of a chemical solution seemed fine. Varian noted all of these peculiarities in his mind, ordered and categorized, watching from a distance. Like today, Hugo was working with a student that Varian did not recognize. From the looks of it, Hugo was less than pleased with his partner. He'd been partnering with other students more and more recently (Varian was trying not to be bothered by that). Hugo's assignment partner floundered with the spell, producing wisps rather than clean sweeps of cool temperatures. If he listened close enough, Varian could even hear Hugo's foot tapping the floor. Finally, Hugo had had enough. He waved a hand. It went fine right up until it didn't. The surface of the brew began to bubble, threatening to boil over. Threats became promise as, in a flash, bubbles filled the room.

All in all, this was one of the better backfires this week.

The commotion drew pretty much every gaze in the class. There were a fair amount of cringing faces, wide eyes, and of course Professor Rumpelstiltskin's ranting and raving at the mistake on display before them. Varian even thought he heard some laughter. *Assholes*, he thought. He himself had been on the receiving end of laughter for mistakes before. It was an old, familiar, shitty feeling, one that he didn't wish upon his roommate. He didn't wish it on anyone, for that matter. For all the varied reactions in the room, and all the eyes on him, Hugo looked indifferent. Remarkably so. Then, he caught a glimpse of Varian, still staring back at him. The blond's expression shifted abruptly, to a look of embarrassment and stress. Then it was gone, as if deliberately smothered, as Hugo turned back to the work at hand (at least, what was left of it).

To anyone untrained in Hugo-Mannerism-ology, it would seem that the Sorcerer's Apprentice was handling this recent downturn in magical capability extremely well. In general, he seemed well. He still came to all his classes on time, still had the same sense of style (although he'd been wearing his own pair of goggles around his neck more frequently), if a little more reserved, and he didn't complain to anyone about his current condition. So, yes, it would seem Hugo was handling everything very well.

But Varian was all too familiar with his roommate's tells. From the way he held his arms over his chest like he was trying to shield himself, to the way his eyes were now quicker to lose their sparkle, to how his glow in moments of (now very rare) magical success was entirely absent. Hugo had all but stopped using magic in his free time. To be honest, he'd stopped doing science in his freetime too, and alchemy, and even mechanics. There was a newfound, almost imperceptible hesitation to Hugo's actions now. With all that free time, Hugo had been pouring himself back into note decoding, ignoring all else. And, as much as Varian appreciated the help, it was killing Varian to see.

The truth of how he was handling everything was plain to see for his roommate. Hugo was barely holding it together.

Meanwhile, Varian found himself splitting his own time between the note decoding and the library. Mostly on the notes, of course. He wasn't spending that much time in the library. Hugo refused to believe this could be a bookmark, a symptom of magic that students with magical destinies apparently had. Varian's first task in proving that statement had been to dive deeper into Ulla's research on the Storybook of Legends.

Surprisingly, at least to Varian, his mother had in fact written about bookmarks, finding this out late one night in their dorm room.

"Hugo!" Varian had frantically motions him over when he decoded the specific page that mentioned them. Not only did it mention *bookmarks*, it also mentioned a specific case of them. "You won't believe this. The notes mention your mom."

For a solid couple seconds, Hugo looked simultaneously like he was going to cry and going to burst a blood cell in his brain. "Oh? In what context?"

"She actually goes into quite a bit of detail about them. And, well, I guess you were right—" Varian had paused, looking at Hugo and finding him looking way too smug (even in his oddly panic-like state). "Oh shut up."

Hugo shrugged. "I didn't say anything."

Varian huffed. "Anyway, like I was saying, bookmarks are a thing. Mom said almost exactly what you said, that they're a result of genetics. She used your mom as an example. Looks like her magic was about as finicky as yours is right now."

So, Varian figured they could rule out bookmarks. Which led him to the library. But even after researching extensively there, nothing appeared to explain Hugo's predicament.

It was clear as day to Varian that messing up his magic in front of all these people was bothering Hugo deep down. After all, if it happened to Varian over and over like this, he would be in shambles, so he couldn't imagine how it must feel for Hugo. All those eyes, all those judgements.

Whenever they left their magical classes together, whether it be Science & Sorcery, Chemythstry, or Magicology, Varian noticed that Hugo would walk in complete silence. He would not be the one to start a conversation. Just like today, after Chemythstry.

"So," Varian started. It was hard to tell, but Hugo flinched at the sound of his voice, staring like he was expecting something unfortunate. "Did you see how upset Rumpelstiltskin looked that everyone got A's on that written exam?"

In an instance, Hugo's frigid disposition melted away.

This usually landed them in a heated conversation (argument), as it did in that moment. So yeah, at the very least, Hugo's in-class demeanor didn't stick outside of class once Varian got him going. Varian felt a little more at ease in these moments of conversation, but not by much. Not nearly enough. Hugo didn't want to talk about his struggles, and Varian didn't want to push. In fact, everytime Varian had brought it up, ever since that first night after the incident, Hugo looked like he was going into fight or flight mode.

Speaking of, Varian's mind kept returning to that first night after the incident, and how quickly Hugo jumped to terrible conclusions like Varian no longer being his friend.

While Varian could safely say that Hugo wasn't still worried about losing him as a friend, it was obvious that his comfort could only remedy the issue to a small extent. Hugo's real problem was how others viewed him, and how easily that could wear a person down over time.

The best Varian could manage to do for him was keep searching for a solution and keep distracting him until then, and that, too, didn't feel like enough. Varian felt so utterly compelled to help. It was a weird feeling. It made no sense, no matter how much Varian examined it. He hadn't known Hugo that long. Almost half a school year now, sure, but that was nothing in the grand scheme. Yet that feeling persisted.

He just really liked being Hugo's friend. He could unpack that later. Yeah, later.

Just like with their other two magical classes, Hugo shut himself up as they reached the doors of Magicology.

Varian's thought of Hugo (of wanting to help Hugo. That's it.) took up so much bandwidth in Varian's mind that he failed to note the absence of the class instructor. This blindspot didn't remedy itself until Madame Baba Yaga, as always floating on a stool, draped in multicolored fabrics but today missing her trademark red scarf, arrived late to the lecture hall. In her hand was a large cup of coffee; an odd choice for late morning, but not something Varian could judge without being hypocritical.

"Students," Madame Yaga, already sounding tired. "There's been a change of plans for today. Our lecture will have to be put on hold—"

"Class is canceled?" A student in the back of the lecture hall called out.

"Technically," Madame Yaga paused, "yes."

Cheers followed, overlapping the sounds of students re-packing their bags and starting to scramble out of their seats.

"But not entirely!" Madame Yaga stressed. "I have a different assignment for you all today. Professor B. Nimble is in need of students, preferably capable of magic, to help with set building and costume re-organization in his drama class. And I," the Madame grit her teeth slightly, "generously offered up my Magicology students for the day."

A chorus of groans followed. Then, a genius spoke.

“Do we have to go?”

Madame Yaga narrowed her eyes. “Technically, no—”

Cheers returned. Students resumed packing their bags.

“However,” Madame Yaga borderline yelled, halting everyone in place. “Of those who attend, the few that are the most helpful in this task, preferable while using magic learned in my class, will receive free excused absences.”

“How many?”

Madame Yaga glared back at the student, as if she was trying to avoid saying out loud exactly how much. “A week’s worth.”

That was all the motivation most of the students needed. While it was still work, at least it wouldn’t be sitting around taking tests. That was good enough. As the students finished storing their school supplies back in their bags, the youngest voice among them spoke up.

“Why?” Yong asked, earnest and confused. “Drama doesn’t have anything to do with magic.”

The rest of the students motioned for the middle schooler to *shut the hell up*.

Madame Yaga looked like she was least looking forward to that question, out of any that could’ve been asked. “The kindness of my heart,” Baba Yaga said through the most hollow voice humanly possible.

Varian made his way over to friends, Hugo following him, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like “oh great” to his roommate. Varian tried to shoot a frown his way, but then the corners of Hugo’s mouth turned upward and he suspected his frown came across as more of a pout. His face felt warm with small rage.

Nuru and Yong met them halfway. The conversation went quickly, as Nurū told them she would not be attending this impromptu field trip. “I wanna check out more of the finished observatory before it gets crowded tonight.” Yong also expressed his disappointment that he would not be joining either. “I have homework that I forgot to finish.”

While Varian was sad to hear them go, Hugo seemed less so.

“Well that’s a shame. I could’ve used your help at the clown convention I was planning to attend, as opposed to this field trip.”

Yong, too nice to see the insult, giggled. Nurū silently mickicked Hugo’s talking with her hand.

“Well, the three of you can have a ton of fun with that, but two of my friends are in drama class, so I figured I’d use the time to visit them,” Varian said. As he adjusted his bag over his shoulder, Hugo paused, his expression thoughtful.

“Actually,” Hugo started, “I think I will join you, oh dear roommate of mine.”

“You will?” Varian, Nurū, and Yong said all at the same time.

But I thought he wants to avoid doing magic around other people. Varian assumed. He must have looked confused, because Hugo inhaled deeply and explained himself further.

“Don’t act so obtuse,” Hugo said, offended. “If I’ve got excused absences, that means one or two missed assignments won’t kill my grade. So, I’ll have more time for...”

Decoding the notes? Varian thought.

Duh. Hugo seemed to convey.

“Plus,” Varian smiled. “Having a couple class sessions free could help you and I avoid burnout and sickness again.”

“Uh,” Hugo held up his hand. “It may help *you* . I was fine.”

“You were coughing up an entire lung.”

“Gross exaggeration from the person who got me sick in the first place.”

“We both got sick at the same time!”

Madame Yaga coughed loudly. “Anyone attending this joint-class session should follow me before I lose more patience and time!” She shouted up to the quartet of students.

The roommates and their friends followed suit. Just as they were about to break off from each other in their separate directions, Yong jumped in Hugo’s way.

“Hugo!” Yong exclaimed. He then dug through his bag. “Before you go, I wanted to give you this.” The middle schooler retrieved a red cylinder with an air horn-looking head from his bag. “It’s a portable fire extinguisher. My parents give me extras on weekends and I figured with how things have been so tough for you, you might want one!”

“Wow,” Hugo said, sarcastic. “That’s the real kind of you. So generous.” Nuru coughed loudly. Hugo stuffed the object into his pocket. “Thanks,” he said a little softer this time.

From there, they parted ways.

Varian hummed. “Well, that was nice.”

“I certainly am nice, aren’t I?” Hugo said, proudly.

“I was talking about Yong.”

The charmatorium was not a place that Varian visited often. He did not attend any classes there, nor did he participate in extracurricular activities there. Other than that time he had to fish Ruddiger out of the rafters, Varian couldn’t actually remember the last time he stepped foot there. Still, that distance did not diminish his appreciation for the location. From the high echoing ceilings, to the polished gold on each railing above and on the ground floor, to the giant tree trunks that framed sides of the stage, with long vines of ivy hanging from the top, Varian would have to be blind not to see the appeal of taking classes here everyday. There was certainly no shortage of seats; enough to fit the entire school, and then some.

Today, while the seats were missing an audience, the stage was bustling. Today's session of Drama was already gathered and underway, with students running to-and-fro around the stage with fabrics and props in hand. A few in particular stood out as familiar. Varian made a beeline for his two friends who were in the drama class.

"Varian!" Eugene and Lance called out, smiles on their faces. In Eugene's case, that smile disappeared as his eyes flickered behind Varian.

"Hugo." Eugene said.

"Nice to see you too," Hugo said.

Varian grimaced. Ever since becoming actual friends with his roommate, he'd wondered how best he could incorporate Hugo into his usual group of friends (not that Hugo was very keen on being incorporated at all). The biggest obstacle in his mind was Eugene and his dislike for the blond. Varian found the whole thing very childish, but the one time he'd brought that up to Eugene he'd gotten a rant about "old wounds" and a whole lot of thinly veiled protective motivations, so he intended to stay out of it this time.

Hugo addressed Lance. "Any animosity from you?"

Lance shrugged. "I'm not one to hold grudges. Can't really afford to, considering my destiny is to make some big mistakes."

Eugene humphed. His air of dislike blew away as he conversed with his oldest friend. "Okay, well, it's not exactly your fault what ends up happening with your gold touch curse later down the line. No one's gonna blame you for that. Destiny and all, right?"

"Oh? Would you still feel that way if I turned *you* into gold?" He playfully elbowed Eugene, who's stance of discomfort broke into one of affection. He shoved his friend back. Then vice versa. This went on for a while.

Before any more pleasant conversation could take place, Madame Baba Yaga and Professor B. Nimble (the drama teacher) called all the students to the center of the stage. He was a tall man, thin like a stick bug. He moved like one too, swaying wildly from moment to moment. On his head sat a top hat as tall as his forearm, with an equally large purple feather stretching out of it. He wore a navy blue blazer with gold patches on each side, as well as the ugliest yellow shirt ever known to man. If the professor was aware of his own terrible fashion choices, he did not show any sign of it.

"And so," Professor Jack B. Nimble started, which thoroughly confused Varian because he literally just started talking. "I'd like to give a warm welcome to the Magicology students here today. And, a very heartfelt thank you to Baba for getting so many of her students to lend us theater enthusiasts a helping hand."

Madame Baba Yaga looked less than pleased. "My pleasure."

Professor B. Nimble went over the basic goals of the class session that day. There were props that needed to be made, old costumes sorted through and fixed, new costumes sewn, and sets/backgrounds to be built and painted. As he did, everyone's attention was slowly but surely pulled away to the stage curtain. Nothing was wrong with it, from looks alone. But it was moving on its own, suddenly and in short spurts. By the time B. Nimble let the students scatter to start their tasks, Varian was all but ready to ask about it. Before he got the chance, Hugo went behind the

curtain, pulling it back manually to reveal a tall metal box, coming up to his hip, with a myriad of switches and levers atop it.

“What about that?” Hugo asked.

From the back of the box, there were metal wires stretching into the stage rafters, leading into the outer red curtain, middle curtain, and the masking curtains. At least, the stage right side of those curtains. Varian took a gander at stage left, where he saw an identical box sat. But the one on the left was far shiner and new looking. While this box... wasn't.

The box sitting behind the curtains was, to put it lightly, unusable. The switch board was in disarray, with several levers snapped in half, leaning at unfortunate angles, and one in particular tweaking erratically. Below, there was a small door into the interior, where wires were barely contained inside places. Surely, that was a flagrant tripping hazard, if not a fire hazard. If that box could speak, it would sound like a gasping dying thing, saying “fix me” over and over. A morbid image, but a fitting one. Varian wasn't sure what could've possibly left it in such terrible condition, and for once his curious mind whispered that he may not want to know. Hugo, on the other hand, scanned the box with intense interest, the gears in his mind visibly turning.

“Pay no attention to the curtain box,” the professor said. “We have a professional coming to fix it in a few days.”

“Okay,” Hugo said. Varian sighed. He knew that tone. It was the I-know-better-than-you tone. “But,” *There it is*, Varian thought. “It's a safety risk as it is,” Hugo continued. “All it will take is a lever getting caught, or a neighboring system flickering on, and those wires could easily short circuit and start sparking. Not to mention,” he didn't wait for permission before kneeling down and opening the door to the box's interior. “The gears in here are completely out of sorts. If you let me, I can—”

Theater professor Professor B. Nimble shook his head. “You're not here to deal with that, Sorcerer's Apprentice. You're better off helping elsewhere. These props aren't going to magically make themselves are they?”

Hugo flinched at the mention of using magic. Varian's stomach churned at the sight.

With the rest of the students scattered around the charmatorium, Hugo returned to Varian's side. He cleared his throat. “So... Goggles,” he sounded very casual. Too casual. Varian raised an eyebrow. Hugo scrutinized him. “Don't look at me like that.”

Varian kept his eyebrow raised. “Then stop acting like you're skirting around something and just tell me.” He tried to sound gentle about it.

Hugo chuckled. “Well, we want time off. Yaga wants us to earn it by using magic. I can't do that in my present state. But *you* can.”

“I'm not following.”

Hugo huffed. “Look: I'll pretend to be casting spells, and you can be the one actually casting them. Thus, making it look like I'm doing magic okay again, making me seem useful, landing both of us some time off.”

“Or it could get us both in trouble,” Varian pointed out. It occurred to Varian, obviously, that this scheme his roommate had thought up may have an ulterior motive. Hugo might want a break from the constant humiliation he’d been experiencing. The constant failing in front of others. It fit very neatly into Varian’s suspicions about Hugo’s real wellbeing amidst all this. But, as bad as it must feel to have his magic backfire in front of his peers, getting caught *pretending* to be good at magic again would be infinitely more humiliating, and only make Hugo feel worse. Varian knew from experience that the desperation of wanting to succeed could be a powerful motivator to do stupid things, and stupid things came with equally stupid consequences.

“Besides,” Varian added. “When exactly will I have time to look like I’m doing my own spells? This plan involves *both* of us getting time off, doesn’t it?” Varian raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah, sure, whatever, but you can make it work. You’re smart,” Hugo said. Varian almost got the chance to be happy about the compliment. Yet, even as he tried to be convincing, the blond couldn’t let it be that simple. “On good days, at least. On bad days, we get explosions.”

Varian crossed his arms. “Well, that sounds like a totally reasonable plan,” his sarcasm was plain. “We *could* do that. Or... I could do my own magic, and only mine, and while you take a break from magic and the notes and just work on something else. Like, oh I don’t know, the box with all the switches and curtains.”

“Why would I do that?” Hugo looked thoroughly puzzled.

Varian blinked. “Well,” the annoyance that previously laced his tone vanished. “It’s just that you seem pretty good at mechanics, and you were interested in it earlier, asking about it and all, so—”

“Goggles, it’s not a priority. We need to keep working on those notes, and getting some time off from Magicology is the perfect opportunity to do that.” Hugo said, before averting his gaze just enough to make his next words seem believable. “Trust me, this is the best use I can make of my—, my time.”

Still deep in his own thoughts, Varian considered the idea. Despite all the ways this could go wrong, Varian’s thoughts kept returning to his desire to help. Hugo deserved a break. He deserved to get back that talent and poise and pride he got under normal circumstances, even if he was a smug asshole when that was the case. If this scheme accomplished that in some small way, he would participate without insult or complaint.

“Fine.”

Hugo relaxed slightly. Funny, Varian hadn’t perceived him as tense. Something in his own face must’ve given away his concern, because then Hugo hummed happily to himself. “Guess you’ll have to suffer my presence for the whole class period. Oh, the misery.”

Okay, maybe he wanted to complain a *little* bit.

“Shut up,” Varian said. “I don’t suffer anything from you. You don’t even appear on my radar.”

“Oh yeah?” Hugo leaned into his roommate’s personal space. “Not even a little.”

Varian watched him bat his eyelashes behind his glasses and for a brief moment was at a loss for words. He decided then to give his roommate a playful shove. This only made Hugo look more

smug. This time it seemed more genuine. Varian wanted to look annoyed, but for some reason all he could muster was a smile (and an eye roll but even that felt affectionate).

“Yeah. Not suffering at all.” Truly, the most sarcastic statement he’d ever said in his life.

They started small. No one was actually asking for Hugo’s help, so Varian did. He asked him to change one of the costumes into a new color.

“I think this shirt would look nice in red,” Varian said. Hugo was supposed to just say, “Okay” and pretend to do the spell (while Varian did it himself). Instead, he chuckled, bemused. Varian couldn’t stop his frown. “What?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Hugo said, looking him up and down. “It’s just, that’s a terrible idea.”

“Excuse me?” Varian’s face scrunched as he spoke. “You haven’t even seen it in that color yet.”

“I don’t need to. I just know.”

“That is such bullshit,” Varian angrily whispered. “If you really did know, you’d have no issues about just doing it and proving me wrong.”

Hugo sneered. “Okay. I will.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.” Hugo raised his hand.

For a second, Varian forgot the plan and made no move to cast the spell himself. His roommate kept his hand raised, nothing about the shirt changing. He coughed. Varian stared back, confused. Hugo stared more intently at him, coughing again. Shit. Right. They had a scheme to pull off. From behind the shirt he held up, Varian waved his hand, finally changing the shirt’s color. And... yeah okay it looked pretty bad in red. Too loud, with too much extra fabric, giving the fashion equivalent of an anatomically correct heart.

“Hey,” Varian said, louder than he probably needed to. He wasn’t exactly a world class actor. “Nice job, Hugo.”

“It was easy. Well, easy for me. Sorry that you needed help with such a simple task.” Hugo adjusted his glasses.

You’re doing this to help him. Varian repeatedly thought to himself. *You’re doing this to help him.*

“Anything else that you need help with regarding magic?”

“No,” Varian grit his teeth. “Thank you.”

“Oh,” Hugo put on a winning grin. “You’re so very welcome, Freckles.”

YOU’RE DOING THIS TO HELP HIM YOU’RE DOING THIS TO HELP HIM YOU’RE—

Before Varian could do anything drastic, another student tapped Hugo on the shoulder.

“Hey, if you’re up for it, we kinda do need help,” the student, who Varian recognized as Raven Queen, pointed to the other side of the stage, where the other students looked deeply visibly nervous. Although, whether it was Hugo’s involvement or Raven’s that bothered them the most was anybody’s guess. She headed back before he really gave an answer.

Hugo gave Varian a wink, starting to make his way over.

“Wait,” Varian tugged his roommate back. “How will I hear what spell they need from way over here? I can’t exactly read lips perfectly.”

Hugo hummed. He dug into his pocket and gently lifted Olivia onto his own hand. He then gave Varian his headphones.

“I’ll keep Olivia by me,” Hugo said. Olivia looked happy at the mention of her own name, which Varian found adorable. Hugo talked some more, which Varian found less adorable. “And you can listen using headphones. She’s got little microphones in her ears,” he scratched her head. “It’s a feature of hers that I’m very proud of.”

“Sounds like it’s made for spying.”

“Worry about the implications later, Goggles.”

With that settled, Hugo joined Raven’s corner and “helped”. Varian heard the spell they asked of him and did it himself. That, at last, attracted the right kind of attention. Not the kind that came with cringing stares and snickers, this time it was the attention Hugo was used to. All except from the people who actually had the power to give them time off from class. Profesor B. Nimble was too busy checking lights in the rafters above the stage, and Madame Yaga... well, she was nowhere to be found.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Hugo huffed, staring up at the rafters. “Hey! Professor!” he yelled. “Where’s Madame Yaga?”

“She had to step out for a moment. An important task came up. She’ll be back eventually, I’m sure,” B. Nimble called down. “In the meantime, she had the strangest request of me. Told me to keep an eye on how well her students did their magic. I suppose I’ll be doing that now.” He said, before strutting across the rafters aimlessly, as if he’d forgotten the way down.

Hugo looked over at Varian. They’d just have to roll with it.

“It’s fine,” Hugo said, more to himself than to Varian. “Come on. We can’t keep standing around looking like we care if people see our magic.”

“Yeah,” Varian said, quieter. “I know.” *That’s probably how Hugo’s been feeling for days now.* Varian resolved then and there to make sure Hugo got his well deserved break from humiliation today.

Too bad the two of them don’t always agree on everything.

From there, the ruse truly began.

All around the stage, set up on makeshift tables, there were props to be dealt with. So many props. The philosophy of the drama department was “waste not, want not,” keeping basically every prop that had ever been made in the storage space behind the stage. While some were newer, most were not. This meant that anything the students needed to use soon needed to be cleaned.

Whatever production the class was planning to put on next, it involved prop weapons. Lots of prop weapons. Hugo was placed on sword duty. The drama class wanted to put on a production of *Romeo and Juliet* soon, so they’d need every fake sword they had to shine like new.

“A spell to make this shine?” Hugo rubbed his hands together. “On it.”

He held out a hand, waiting, mouthing nonsense under his breath. Varian could hear it through the headphones, keeping himself at a safe enough distance that his help would not be seen. He noted that Hugo’s muttered-gibberish sounded just enough like a spell without actually being one to fool the average close listener, if there were any. Varian, pretending to examine a different prop, began the spell. After a moment, a sparkling shine materialized on the wooden prop in front of Hugo, giving it the semblance of metal without actually changing its composition. The last thing anyone wanted was a real sword-related injury on opening night.

“Huh,” Hugo muttered, just low enough for only Varian to hear. “I wouldn’t have gone with that spell. Sloppy as hell.”

“What was that?” The student who’d requested Hugo’s help, Ginger Breadhouse (who, yes, smelled like gingerbread; she even dressed like she was made of frosting and sugar) asked.

“Nothing,” Hugo said quickly and calmly.

Varian received a few disquiet stares as other students noticed how intently he was glaring at the prop in his hands. It occurred to him then that this arrangement left him no way to talk back to his roommate. The headphones (and Olivia) allowed him to listen in to Hugo’s words, but not the other way around. *Hugo’s dream come true, I’m sure*. Varian couldn’t help but think, slightly infuriated.

Then again, that could be an advantage.

“Cool spell, Hugo,” Varian said, joining Hugo out of the blue, trying to sell his “impressed” tone of voice. “Although, if I’d done it, I would have gone with a shimmer spell, rather than a sparkle spell. It would make the shine on the prop last a bit longer.”

Varian wasn’t a mind reader, but if he had to guess, Hugo was thinking something very mean, using some very not nice words, about his roommate.

“Unsolicited advice isn’t appreciated, Goggles,” Hugo stared down at him, seething.

“I completely agree, Glasses,” Varian said, a little too happily.

The poor future candy witch, Ginger, still standing near them couldn’t find it in her to interrupt... whatever this was. She left long before they saw she was gone.

Aside from props, there were old costumes to be fixed and new costumes to be made. That turned out to be harder than anticipated. As he spent his time secretly helping Hugo, Varian was also being

requested to help by his own friends.

“Varian? You up for—” Eugene started, cutting himself off as he took in the scene before him. Varian, it seemed, was in the middle of a conversation. A totally rational, calm conversation with Hugo. Joy.

“—I’m telling you. Listen!” Varian said, arms practically flailing.

Hugo was the face. “I am listening! It’s just that what you were saying is incorrect.”

“Okay, well, maybe you’ll see my point if I walk away. Cause I bet,” Varian laughed, humorless. “Once I walk away, you’re gonna think it over, and you’re gonna do the spell I think works better,” he started to back up.

“No, no,” Hugo grabbed Varian like a cat, dragging him back over. “I *really* think you should listen to my advice.”

“I’m not the one helping with costumes right now, Hugo. I’m going to another part of the stage. I don’t need your advice on how to do a sewing spell. I already know how to do a sewing spell.”

“Varian?” Eugene asked again. Unfortunately, he went unheard.

“Knowing how to do a running stitch sewing spell is basically the same as not knowing any sewing spells,” Hugo insisted. “If I could just show you how to do a backstitch, the *better* version of the sewing spell, this would go a lot smoother.”

“Well, I *would*. But I’m sure I would mess it up,” Varian said, meaning only fully understood by Hugo. “Maybe, for now, we should take what we can get.”

Eugene watched this strange exchange of words. There was an unmistakable air of double meaning to it, but for the life of him he couldn’t figure out what that meaning was.

Next to him, Lance hummed. “How long do you think it would take them to realize if everyone here left?” Eugene sputtered. Lance, on the other hand, decided to take the chance at comedy gold. He approached the two roommates as they continued their back and forth, oblivious to his presence until he grabbed their shoulders.

“Alright, alright, let’s not get our stitches in a twist here.”

Both roommates gave his joke their best dead eyed stares. Lance was unphased. “Good. Argument’s over. Now kiss and make up.”

Looking at the two roommates, you’d be forgiven for thinking that they both had acquired full-face sunburns with how red they went. Varian walked (ran) away almost immediately, head empty, no thoughts in sight. Meanwhile Hugo stood there half mortified, half unsure why he was so mortified.

For entirely separate reasons, both Eugene and Lance were thoroughly intrigued by these reactions. One hopeful for what it meant, one dreading for what it meant.

Still, there was yet more to do. There were sets and backgrounds to build and paint.

While the sets mostly required simple levitations, a task which Hugo *could* perform in his present state, his sudden recovery from chronic magical mishaps led students to ask him (and unknowingly ask Varian) for more complex spells. One such spell was to grow vines.

“As many as you can make,” clarified the student who’d asked, Lizzie Hearts, the next Queen of Hearts from Wonderland. Fittingly, she wore tons of hearts in red and black, in a dress that resembled a fallen deck of cards. “Nevermind how long they grow. I’ll be slicing them to the appropriate length myself.” While Hugo was a little put off by her enthusiasm to “slice” anything (she even kept her nails sharpened to razor point), including the stage curtain which she was currently digging her fingers into, he accepted the request.

The stage itself had vines like the ones this spell could make. They’d been there for years, remaining green and picturesque despite being indoors and away from sunlight. That, obviously, was all thanks to magic.

Unfortunately, Hugo was asked to do this while Varian was up on the balcony of the set, in plain view of everyone. So, the only solution (well, not the only solution) was for Hugo to go up there to him. Make it look like both of them were making the vines together. After all, it was a complicated spell. They could get away with seeming to work together in front of people, right? They’d done it before!

So, with “remarkably” “coincidental” timing (he heard the request on the headphones), Varian yelled down to him. “Hey, Hugo! Could you give me a hand growing vines up here?”

Hugo smirked. “How does it feel to be tall for once?” He yelled.

“How does it feel to constantly be a dick?” Varian yelled back. Various students snickered at that.

Hugo scoffed. *Stupid balcony. Stupid Varian.* Then, his expression grew gleeful. He sighed, loudly and with intense emotion. “I take thee at thy word. Call me but love, and I’ll be baptized anew; Henceforth I will never constantly be dick.”

It took Varian a moment, distracted by the return of laughter, to realize that Hugo was quoting Romeo and Juliet at him. *Stupid balcony. Stupid Hugo.* His face became red.

“Oh, my fucking god.”

Hugo didn’t bother repressing a wide grin. He held his hands over his heart. “Wherefore art thou, oh Varian!” His voice choked with overdramatics.

“Just get your ass up here!”

Hugo smiled so smugly that Varian nearly screamed. Then he got the sweet, sweet satisfaction of watching the curtain malfunction and collide with Hugo. Varian did scream after that, but from laughter. Hugo was less amused, but at least he finally made his way up to the fake platform to help him.

“Thank you!” Lizzie called up to them, her voice carrying loud and sharp as ever, but actually fitting in this moment due to the height and distance she stood from the pair, before stomping to the ends of the vines to cut them to the right length. A couple other students echoed such sentiments before getting on with their tasks.

Varian found himself beaming. He wasn't ashamed to admit how nice it felt to be seen using magic (and being allowed to do so. This was still technically a joint class with Magicology for the day) and being praised for it.

Hugo must be used to this. He gets to do magic whenever he wants. Varian thought, absently, before the present circumstances caught up with him. *Well, normally.* Varian glanced over at his roommate. Hugo looked cordial about it all. Cordial and bored.

"Huh." Varian said aloud.

Hugo turned quickly to him, far more focused now than he was while hearing the thank yous.
"What?"

"I just assumed you'd enjoy the admiration a bit more."

"Why would you assume that?"

Varian's curiosity dropped into disbelief. "Literally on our first day of classes, you stopped a fire in the castleteria and acted like you were god's fucking gift to the world."

A snort escaped Hugo. "I think you're looking back at that with rose colored glasses. Maybe *you* were the one seeing me that way. Which, let's be honest, would not be surprising."

Varian must've looked as furious as he felt, because Hugo seemed exponentially more thrilled by his reaction.

Not every moment of the hour was spent working. In between tasks, Varian and Hugo elected to wander around, scouting places for Hugo, with Varian's help, to offer assistance. All in the service of getting those days off, of course. Totally not wanting to help his roommate feel better.

All the while they kept an eye on the Professor, who had indeed observed Hugo's falsified efforts (but clearly didn't see the falsity of them) as well as Varian's genuine efforts between moments of aiding his roommate. Regardless, as they went around the charmatorium and the stage, Varian was relieved (a feeling that he found startlingly often in Hugo's company) to partake in light conversation with his roommate.

"Do you ever think about how weird it is that our school does plays and shit?" Varian asked.

"How so?"

"Well, I guess the weird part is that we do plays based on fairytales and tall tales, and all the tales."

"I'm aware of the tales, yes."

"So it's gotta be awkward for whichever students are actually in that story in real life."

"Huh. I guess so."

"Yeah! We've got the next Romeo and Juliet literally going to this school—"

"I met Rome actually. Not the brightest guy. A little quite to start crying... "

“Sure, but you see what I mean, right? Weird play to put on.”

No response.

Hugo wasn't walking at the same speed anymore. He wasn't paying attention. He wasn't even looking at him. His scrutinizing gaze squarely fixed on the switchboard for the curtains. It truly looked like someone took a sledgehammer to it. Varian knew of Hugo's interest in mechanics. His half-delirious rambles about tiny gears and “brilliance” of Olivia (which Varian would've found overly boastful if he wasn't thoroughly impressed by the mouse) when they were both ill stuck out in Varian's mind. From the look on his face, Varian could tell the gears in his brain were turning at full speed. He knew how to fix it, or at least how to start the process.

This scheme of theirs wasn't helping Hugo. All it was doing was making them argue. And yeah, they always argued, but usually the blond was way more fun to argue with. This was all frustration, no fun.

Varian knew Hugo well enough to know that he found mechanics *fun*. Exciting! That determination, that feeling of *I can do something right*, was a feeling that Varian knew very well. To him, it was the best feeling in the world. But, while Varian felt it about alchemy, magic, and science in general, Hugo felt that way about mechanics.

Maybe it was time for a new strategy.

“You know,” Varian tried his best to sound casual. “If you want, I bet you really could convince B. Nimble to let you work on—”

Hugo froze. “I'd rather not get in trouble. Are you trying to get rid of me or something?”

Varian almost humored him, until he saw Hugo's face. Despite his tone of mirth, there was underlying, unnerving, calmness that made Varian think Hugo may not have been joking.

“I bet they still need help adding new paint to the finished backgrounds,” Hugo said, completely throwing Varian off before he had the chance to say anything. “I'll do that for now. You go get yourself some credit and time off.”

“Okay,” Varian said, but Hugo was already gone.

Strategy failed.

“Varian!” Lance called. “We could use a hand over here.”

So, Varian went, trying to shift his thoughts towards what lay ahead. It was a surprisingly difficult task.

Lance, in addition to about a dozen other students, had set up shop around the empty audience seats. Their task was not a difficult one, just tedious. They had to sort through the repainted props and add a new coat, then set them out to dry on paper that lined the side aisles of the charmatorium. The perfect opportunity for magic to make life a little easier.

So, the pattern became, Lance would point out which props were done being repainted, and Varian would cast a drying spell. As they went along, they talked about this and that, their days thus far,

their classes, some funny comment Eugene made about his and Lance's professor, etc, etc. This, eventually, led to Lance asking the million dollar question.

"So..." Lance stretched out the word. "Do tell, how *are* things between you and Hugo?"

"Oh my god," Varian said. It took no further pushing than that for Varian to vent for minutes on end about his roommate. In contrast to how he used to vent about Hugo, before Legacy Day, these latest vents were far and few between. Additionally, rather than being about his loathing of his roommate, these days it was more about his morbid fascination with him as a friend. Tales of his "terrible" sense of humor, his "annoying" nerve to tease at every opportunity, and his "unbearable" grins. All topics that had been gone over before. But now, Varian's words were underlined with a tangible affection for those qualities in his roommate, equaling the still real rage they caused him. Often, this ended with the short, freckled student smiling, despite himself. But today, at the apex of this vent, Varian's wide smile turned downward.

"I don't understand him," Varian cast another drying spell, waiting for the paint to become still. "More so lately."

Lance's expression became very smug. "Why do you care so much about understanding him?"

"Because we're friends," Varian said simply. "And if he needs me, I want to be there for him."

"Right," Lance said, slowly. "He needs *you*."

"Yeah, yeah, I already know I'm being presumptuous."

"No," Lance said, sing songily. "Just oblivious."

Varian's brows furrowed, thoroughly confused yet again.

Lance slung an arm around Varian's shoulder. "Oh Varian, you sweet summer child."

"I wasn't born in summer—"

"I'm going to let you figure this one out on your own. You're smart, Mr. Smartie Pants," Lance said. "But when you *do* figure it out, I'll be here, with plenty of advice."

As Lance pulled away his hand, Varian spotted a little bit of gold dust on his shirt, right where his friend's hand had rested. His friend, the next King Midas, to be cursed with gold touch someday. Just like all the Midas' before him.

"Bookmark," Varian muttered. Huh. It surprised even himself that he never noticed that about his friend. Maybe he just wasn't looking for it. That persistently remained Varian's favorite challenge of science, alchemy, magic, and even research: learning to look for things before you're told what to look for.

From his pocket, a subtle screeching noise emanates. Varian scrambled for the headphones. In a panic, he threw them back on, worried he'd missed a requested spell for the scheme. Instead, all he heard was more screeching. He was just about to go find Hugo, to tell him to please for the love of God shut off Olivia's microphone, but the noise stopped. In its place, Varian heard voices.

"Why, oh why, why didn't they make this giant ass prop with wheels?" Eugene, out of breath, complained. "Do they expect people to drag it across the stage in the middle of a scene change?"

Unbelievable.”

Hugo’s voice emerged, closer than Eugene’s, with a huff. “How the hell should I know?”

Varian imagined it was probably filled with Eugene flipping him off, and vice versa. He was just about to take out the headphones, uninterested in how their petty dislike dragged itself onward.

“So,” Eugene started, the words coming out stiff. “You and Varian. How’s that working?”

Varian stopped mid-reach for the headphones.

Hugo ignored Eugene’s question at first, stillness stretching between them. But then, he laughed. It didn’t seem like a laugh at anything around him, but more so at something internal. Like some inside joke that he’d chosen to revisit. Then, at last, he responded. “None of your business.”

Eugene sputtered. “Well, I was just trying to make conversation, ass.”

“Make it with someone else,” Hugo said, a grin obvious in his voice. Varian, still listening, had to stop himself from giggling.

“Surprising to see you using magic.”

A far less peaceful silence stretched in the wake of Eugene’s comment.

“How so?” Hugo said. Varian had to remind himself that Hugo probably assumed (hoped) that only those in his more magical classes were currently aware of his recent blunders. But, as Varian knew

“Word spreads fast.”

Hugo made no noise of response. Varian wished he could see his face, assess the situation further. He felt he was missing a whole other aspect of the conversation.

Eugene continued. “Varian was in the library a while back, absolutely tearing into books about magical curses and things like that. When I politely approached him,” Varian rolled his eyes at that. In reality, Eugene had thrown an arm around his shoulder without warning and made him yelp loud enough for the whole library to hear. Varian was still a little pissed about that to be honest. He kept listening to Eugene’s words, “and asked why he was doing that, Varian told me he was trying to help a friend. I’ve seen him in the library at least a dozen times since then, and I’m guessing it was all for the same reason, cause he was in the same section each time.”

Hugo hummed. “Is that right?” His tone slipped ever so slightly into something softer than before. Almost scared.

Varian kicked himself. It wasn’t that he wanted to *hide* how much he wanted to help Hugo, but there’d been this strange unspoken agreement between them to not talk about it. At least, Varian didn’t want to be the one to bring it up to Hugo until he had answers for him. He knew it wasn’t a pleasant topic, and he preferred his roommate in a pleasant mood. Well, as pleasant as he could be while he kept being his typical annoying, smug, self-aggrandizing unfairly good looking self.

“Is it? Is it right?” Eugene insisted. “Is he helping a *friend*?” Varian stilled. “I’m just saying, last I really heard from you, what you called “friends” were people you ended up blaming for your failures. So, is he a *friend*, or a friend?”

Hugo scoffed. “I didn’t even *know* he was doing something like that.”

“Like hell you didn’t. Seriously, dragging other people into your messes is your M.O. Is that what you’ve got him doing today too? Helping you get through this joint class without having some magical explosion in his face?” Eugene asked.

Hugo said nothing.

Varian wanted to sprint to the stage and... he didn’t know what he’d do. A selfish part of him wanted to hear more. Hugo wasn’t talking to him, not seriously. To be honest, he really hadn’t since... shit, maybe Legacy Day.

“And while we’re on the topic of your oh-so dedicated helpfulness, and this one’s been bugging me for a while,” Eugene pivoted. “What’s with you assisting Varian with his,” Eugene used air quotes for the next word, “research.”

Varian had to remind himself to breathe. He should have stormed up to the stage and interrupted right then and there. Talking about Ulla’s research openly was a bad idea. Whether it was in spite of this fact or because of it, Varian was utterly paralyzed.

Eugene’s voice got a little too loud for Hugo’s liking. “Keep your voice down! You’re the one who’s going to get your friend in trouble.”

“*My* friend? Oh, so he’s *not* your friend.”

“You know damn well what I mean.”

Eugene had no response to that. Then, “You didn’t answer my question earlier.”

“He’s a friend.” Hugo said, immediate and firm. Varian breathed a little easier. Not that he truly doubted anything in the first place. Still, it was nice to confirm. “Trust me, Goggles has enough to deal with. I don’t plan on adding myself to that list. I’m making sure of that, especially now.”

Huh? What the hell does that mean?

“And, if you must know, I’m helping with that “research” because Varian thinks it could give everyone what they want. Which, if I’m being honest, sounds like wasteful, wishful thinking.” Varian huffed. No surprise there. “But,” Hugo cleared his throat. Varian let a little bit of hope enter his mind. “If he thinks his mom found a way to let everyone have their cake and eat it too, then I want to see if he’s right. If he is, then I’ve spent my time well.”

Eugene hummed. “And if he’s wrong?”

Hugo’s voice hardened. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.” From the way he said it, so sure, Varian was tempted to believe he already knew what the future held. Pessimism made people think they were practically prophets, Varian supposed.

“Well,” Eugene coughed. “That was a nice little speech. But I’m still not convinced of your motives.”

“Hope dies last,” Hugo said with a singsong tone.

“Varian!” Lance said, with a tone that suggested he’d said it several times. Varian scrambled to take out the headphones. Lance shrugged. “I think we’ve got all the help we need here. If you wanna go check on anything, feel free.”

“Right, check on anything,” Varian nodded.

“Or anyone,” Lance added.

Varian chose to ignore that. It didn’t take long to find Hugo.

“Look who finally came out of the woodwork. Couldn’t bear to be parted from me, could you?” Hugo said. Varian didn’t dignify that with a response. His roommate soon implied (bluntly said) that he wanted an escape from spending time with Eugene (he was offended by this but told him to get lost anyway), so the two of them ended up walking off together.

“How about that spy tech, huh?” Hugo casually asked.

“Eh, it was okay. A little too much background noise—” Varian shut up real fast when he realized what he’d been asked. Slowly, he dared to look at his roommate. Hugo smirked without remorse. Varian stuttered over his words. “How did you know I was listening?!”

“Didn’t. But you did just tell me, so thanks.”

Varian’s face felt extremely hot. Hugo smiled faux-sweetly at him, batting his eyes. Despite his embarrassment, Varian managed to silently convey the question that now hung over him. *You okay?*

The corner’s of Hugo’s mouth lowered for a moment, but didn’t completely disappear. He leaned back slightly, waving a hand as if to say, *Nothing broken, nothing bruised*. “Your friend needs a good ass kicking, though.”

Varian laughed a little, which made Hugo look even more proud of himself.

“Okay well,” Varian faltered. Then, an idea popped into his head. “There’s actually a great opportunity approaching to, metaphorically, do that,” he leaned into Hugo’s personal space. “You should join the game.”

Hugo pulled back. “The what?”

“The Finders Keepers game. My friends and I are *finally* going to play it soon.” Varian figured that for all his hesitation, Hugo might find it fun. On the plus side, it could be a good opportunity for Hugo to get along better with the rest of Varian’s friends. Not that it mattered to Varian whether Hugo liked his friends and vice versa, or anything like that. Definitely not.

“Yeah, no. Not happening,” Hugo said. “It’s bad enough that you and your friends have been waiting so long to actually get on with the game that I’m *still* hearing about it. I mean, that’s ridiculous, you understand that right? Why has it taken so long?”

“Prep time is vital to the game,” Varian sounded remarkably serious.

“Goggles, I mean this in the nicest way possible,” Hugo held his shoulder. “The less I know about this game, the better.”

“You literally just asked me about it.”

“And I’m worse off for it.”

As the joint class session carried on, Madame Yaga still hadn’t returned. In addition to that, the malfunctioning curtain was becoming less and less ignorable. Now, it had developed beyond semi-small spurts of movement and into full sprints across the stage, swift and without warning.

Varian was willing to ignore it. But, Hugo seemed less able to do so.

“Fix it in a few days,” he muttered to himself, and consequently into the speakers that Varian was listening in to. His tone mimicked that of Professor B. Nimble. “A few days my ass. That thing is gonna fall apart long before that, left like this. Irresponsible asses. Lazy oafs.”

It definitely didn’t help that Hugo was becoming more and more *done* with their scheme. Even so, whenever Varian began to suggest, more than once now, that they just stop doing it, Hugo refused. He refused so forcefully, as if he was being asked a trick question.

Varian hadn’t realized that people’s opinions were getting to him so badly. That had to be the reason he was so committed to this.

Pulling him from his thoughts, Varian heard a spell being requested of Hugo. Varian couldn’t quite hear what it was, but his roommate had him covered. “One moving-landscape coming up.” He said.

Hugo stood himself in front of one of the stage-wide painted backgrounds and began the motions of the spell. Varian, watching from a distance, did the same. He tore his gaze away from his roommate and kept his eyes solely on his hands. The sound of the curtain moving on its own yet again nearly broke that concentration. Varian groaned, trying to stay focused on the moving-landscape spell. He heard Hugo mutter an expletive. He had to focus for this to work.

This was a spell that required a moment of “charging up” as one of his professors had put it. It required basically imagining the landscape moving in your head, making all the details yourself, then projecting them outward. It was not a favorite of Varian’s. Rapunzel asked him to do it with one of her paintings before, one or two times, but she never found it as magical as when she painted a similar effect herself. Varian happily agreed with that sentiment.

As he charged the spell, the curtain moved on its own yet again. This time, letting out an ear piercing screech as it did, like gears being dragged along a stone floor.

“That’s it!” Hugo yelled. Varian winced, damn near ready to rip out the headphones had his hands not been occupied. That concern quickly vanished as he watched Hugo suddenly storm away, no longer pretending to do any spell.

In the midst of his dumbfoundedness at his roommate’s boiling over frustration, Varian forgot to de-charge the spell. By then, it was too late. The spell shot away from him, right on the painted background that Hugo was supposed to be standing in front of. As if a ghost had done the spell.

Too many people saw that. Way too many. But Varian’s eyes narrowed in on a particular figure. One’s who, from how intently he’d been watching the spot where Hugo stood, had seen the entire

moment play out. Professor B. Nimble.

Oh no.

Before Varian could think of a plan of action to counter this potential busting of the scheme, a nearby crashing of items called the professor's attention away. Varian watched him rush away, far enough backstage that he was entirely out of sight.

Then, Varian sprinted in the direction Hugo had gone.

When he found him, a piece of his panic was displaced by surprise.

Hugo was crouched at the curtain box, a collapsible pocket wrench in his hand, *where'd he get that?* Olivia sat on his shoulder shining a very small but seemingly helpful light at the open box.

"Oh," Varian said.

So fixated as he'd been, Hugo hadn't even heard his roommate approach. Surprise caused him to drop the wrench in his hand. He caught it in his other hand in the same second as the drop, like he'd intended to switch his hand that way all along. Totally.

His eyes flickered toward Varian, then away, then back, then away again. "Hey."

The surprise that Varian felt gave way to a wisenheimer smile. "Whatcha doing?"

Hugo scrambled to put away wires, using far less care than he'd demonstrated a moment earlier. "Nothing useful," he said. "I shouldn't, I know I know— But, oh my god *someone* needed to do something it's not even— forget it, this was a waste of time."

Varian raised his hands, as if in defense, "You won't hear me say that." *I'd be a hypocrite if I did.*

"You *should* say that, though. Mechanics isn't helping either of us get time off," Hugo countered, frowning as though he were mad at himself in place of Varian.

"So what? Hugo," Varian said. Maybe it was time to be direct. "Look, you don't have to skirt around the reason we're doing this. We can try to keep up the scheme if you don't want to worry about what people think for the day." *It's a terrible feeling. I know it well*, Varian thought. *Any relief from it is worthwhile, and Hugo's been dealing with it for—*

Hugo stared at him like he had three eyes. "What are you talking about?"

Varian opened his mouth to say... something, but no words came. Confusion choked his voice. "What are *you* talking about? Don't you care about dealing with that *all* the time now. If it was me, I'd do anything to avoid it."

Hugo tilted his head. Varian had never seen a more scathing look of *Be fucking for real*. "Goggles, I couldn't care less about what they think of me."

"But then," Varian started, confused. "What was with all those panicked, embarrassed looks you had on when I saw you in class. I mean, literally, everytime you messed up and met my eyes you looked like people's opinions were the only thing that mattered to you." Varian shook his head.

"And, wait, better question, what was this whole scheme for then?"

“Exactly what I said it was for!” Hugo half-hooted from amazement at his roommate’s overthinking. “To get time off to help *you* with the notes. Make myself useful in some way.”

“Yeah, but—” Varian stopped talking, his confusion growing more intense. “Why do you care if I see you as useful? You just said you don’t care what people think of you.”

Hugo clicked his tongue. “I said I don’t care what *they* think of me. Not that I don’t care what *anyone* thinks. There’s only a couple people whose opinions mean anything at all D- my mom, for one. And,” Hugo’s eyes landed on Varian for a moment. His words seemed to finally catch up with his brain. Embarrassed, he refused to elaborate.

Varian didn’t need him to elaborate. He listened to Hugo’s words; really listened. He’d been an idiot; a projecting idiot. All those times Varian had caught Hugo’s eyes and found him terrified of being observed in his blunders, he hadn’t been upset about just *anyone* judging him. Just someone particular.

“Me?” Varian asked, split between flattery and bewilderment. “You cared what *I* thought.”

Hugo’s face scrunched up. “Don’t get all up in arms about it. I live with you. I can’t exactly escape your relevance in my life. Not to mention that you sometimes, every now and then, once in a blue moon, have an opinion worth listening to. Maybe even less. If today has taught me anything, it’s that you should be removed from that list solely based on the company you keep. You have absolutely no standards for who you keep as friends—”

“Hey!”

“—It helped in my case, at least.”

“You!”

“I mean, any rational person would have dropped me as a friend like a hot potato after seeing all that.”

“I—” Varian’s words halted. “What?”

Hugo stopped talking too, but mostly out of confusion. Then, out of panic.

Varian couldn’t see his own face at that moment. But if he had, he would’ve seen that he looked completely lost. Despite his intelligence, despite his ability to understand the un-understandable, Varian could not comprehend, he *refused* to comprehend that statement.

“You’ve been waiting for me to do that to you? To just, stop being your friend?”

Hugo shrugged. “No. But, if I kept being completely useless, then—”

A cold dose of understanding washed over him.

It wasn’t the best emotion at the moment, but right then all Varian felt was infuriated. Not with Hugo, but with himself. He wanted to be smarter, better at making his roommate understand that he was his *friend* whether he was doing well or not. He had the hubris, the pride to want to undo whatever fucked up past lessons the world (and if he had to guess, the Sorcerer herself) instilled in his friend.

Varian's fury kept him a little too quiet. The silence did nothing to soothe either of them.

Wordlessly, Hugo started to stand up, as if to get back to their scheme. Olivia, still on his shoulder, freaked at the sudden movement. She slipped. Varian stepped forward, catching her. His roommate stopped, once again frozen in place, all too similar to how he'd freeze after every class involving magic as he walked next to Varian.

Words didn't seem the best route. Actions spoke louder. Maybe the wannabe-mechanic just needed a push in that direction.

"Seriously," Varian said. "You rushed away in the middle of a spell, which Professor B. Nimble *saw*. This scheme is as good as busted. So, we might as well put our energy into something that matters to us, even if it gets us in more trouble."

"It won't help us. It won't help you." Hugo said, words hollow.

"It matters to you. So, it matters to me. That makes it more important than any potential time off."

Hugo had the gall to look shocked; shocked and maybe a little bashful. Maybe Varian felt a little bashful too. Maybe that was way too forward for his emotionally repressed friend.

"Okay then how about this: If our scheme is already busted, fixing something like this might get us in the professor's good graces," Varian said. "Think you *can* fix it?" He smirked.

"I know I can," Hugo said immediately, without doubt or hesitation. It might've been the gleam of Olivia's flashlight (still shining) on his shoulder and reflecting in his glasses, but for a moment Varian was sure that he literally saw Hugo's gem-like green eyes sparkle. It left Varian speechless.

"Goggles? Are you gonna keep staring, or are you going to help cover for me?"

Varian let out a noise somewhere between a laugh and a gasp. "Yep. Yeah. Will do." Then, an idea came to him. "Actually, I will need one more thing from you." Varian tried to act serious, since he knew that his request would be taken as a grave one by the blond.

"I need to borrow Olivia."

"Professor," Varian yelled. He'd all but sprinted in the direction of Professor B. Nimble. Sure enough, he was where the other students had said: in the storage room, sorting through old costumes by throwing ones he wanted to fix into his arms, giving off the impression that he had very puffy, multi-colored sleeves. He seemed to be in his own world.

"Professor!" Varian yelled, scrambling into the room. In Varian's pocket, Olivia squirmed slightly, having been jostled by all the running. There she would stay for the time being. Varian's plan required that she be out of sight. "My mouse is missing!"

"Oh!" He responded, dropping the costumes in heaps on the floor, clapping his hands together. "How exciting!"

"Yes, but that's the thing. She got in the way of one of my spells and while the spell itself wasn't dangerous," he paused. "In combination with certain metals, it can be explosive."

“Are we to go searching for her gears then?”

Varian yelled. “No! No, but at any moment she could crash into a wall or, for goodness sakes, someone’s foot and then...”

“Pop!” Professor B. Nimble chortled. He stopped abruptly. “I see the problem.”

From there, Varian was able to keep the professor right at his side, leading him in every switch direction that he “thought” he heard Olivia running. Every direction except towards Hugo.

Speaking of which, Hugo’s work on the curtain switchboard box seemed to be going... okay. The curtain was moving more and more erratically, as if someone was tearing away at the wires. Varian found himself again wishing he had a way of speaking to Hugo from all the way across the room, just so he could tell him “COULD YOU PLEASE FIX THINGS WITHOUT SO MUCH FLAIR?!”

Eventually, the professor’s very loud calls for the “missing” mouse garnered the attention of other students. Varian elected to keep the story to himself, but B. Nimble did no such thing. Yada yada missing metal mouse this yada yada mouse could be a bomb that yada yada eventually lead to basically everyone in class looking for Olivia.

This posed new problems, the biggest of them being that Varian could not keep the entire class away from Hugo, nor could he keep the professor at a safe distance at the same time.

Just when Varian reached the peak of his stress, an idea came to him.

Carefully, making sure no one was looking, Varian ran to Hugo, still working on the box. He didn’t notice his roommate’s approach, his eyes (behind his own pair of spiked goggles) totally fixed on the innermost gears and wires of the box. When Hugo finally did realize he’d returned, he acknowledged his presence with a crispy chuckle. “Is your plan seriously falling apart already? Can’t trust you with anything.”

“How close are you to being done?” Varian asked, out of breath yet again.

Hugo’s focus remained on the box. A spark inside of it became a small flame. Calmly, he pulled out the mini extinguisher he’d been gifted and smothered the fire. “Nearly there. I’ll need another minute. Why? Can’t keep them all away for even that long?”

Varian ignored him. Okay, he glared at him, but only a little. Carefully, he lifted Olivia out of his own pocket.

“Sorry about this, Livi,” Varian waved his hand over her shiny metal exterior, casting a bit of magic. “Drastic times call for drastic measures.”

“Woah, woah, what are you doing?!”

“Cover your ears. You’ll get your minute in five,” He then placed her on the ground.

“Five?” Hugo asked, now far more panicked than before.

“Four,” Varian said, running away as quietly as he could. Olivia, despite all the chaos around her, looked unbothered.

“Three,” Varian counted to himself. “Two.” He’d never actually done that particular spell before. It was supposed to create a series of explosions, similar in appearance and sound to fireworks. Ultimately harmless, but loud and flashy nonetheless. If all went well, it would create the illusion that a small explosion had gone off, hopefully driving the professor and the other students away from Hugo.

Again, it’s *supposed* to do that, and this was Varian’s first time actually using this particular spell. Things don’t always work on the first try.

Oh my god. I didn’t just set Olivia to actually explode next to Hugo, right?

A second passed. Then another second. Varian held his goggles for good luck (and comfort).

Then it sounded like a million little fireworks went off at the same time.

As expected, most of the surrounding students went in the opposite direction of the sound. Varian stayed in his makeshift hiding spot, watching them pass. He spotted the professor, running with a wild grin and going on about how “exciting” today turned out to be. Still, he urged the students to step out of the charmatorium for a moment. Then, safely out of everyone’s sight, Varian bolted back to his roommate, who had his hands over his ears. Olivia, (still in one piece thank GOD) sat next to him.

Hugo looked thoroughly irate. “I’m going to kill you.”

“Kill me later,” Varian said, adrenaline-fueled, “Are you done?”

Hugo pulled one more wire into place, shutting the metal door. Then, he stood, pulling each lever in quick succession. Not a single one got stuck, and not a single one twitched on its own. The curtain moved when the levers were moved, and remained still when they were still. Varian watched and waited for his reaction to this success. As Hugo traded his spiked goggles for the glasses hanging off of his shirt collar, he looked utterly and completely satisfied. Accomplished, even. Happy, perhaps. All in all, he looked like himself.

“Great,” Varian said. “Now we just need to run and join the others and we won’t strike anyone as suspicious at all—”

“Heavens! That could’ve been quite the pickle.” Professor B. Nimble said, his voice full of frisson.

Varian and Hugo froze. Before them stood not only Professor B. Nimble, but Madame Yaga as well.

Hugo put on his most confident, gracious voice. “Don’t mind us professor, madame, just wanted to keep helping as best we can. You mentioned that fixing the box was alright, right? I distinctly remember you saying that.”

At the same time, Varian spoke over him, taking a different approach to getting caught. “Pay no attention to the students behind the curtain,” he said, hoping against hope that the curtain would malfunction and give them both an escape route. It did not. *Stupid Hugo and his stupid intelligence and talent and passion for mechanics.* A nervous laughter spilled out from him.

Madame Yaga floated ever closer. “Must I truly, constantly, be supervising the two of you? Lest disaster befall everyone around you?”

Hugo flinched at her words. Varian, too, felt small.

“I hope you two enjoyed the idea of getting time off from class. Or the idea of not having more detentions to suffer through,” Madame Yaga raised her voice. “Because stupidity of this level warrants no such luxuries.”

Varian glanced at Hugo, who’s eyes were firmly on the ground.

“Now, now, Baba,” B. Nimble patted her shoulder. “Let’s not be hasty. I say we let them off with a warning this time.”

“A warning?” Three voices said simultaneously. Two hopeful, one outraged.

“Jack, students of mine cannot run around thinking I allow this kind of—”

“A one-time warning, then,” Jack B. Nimble relented. “Perhaps in exchange for an early end to your bet debt?” Madame Yaga seethed. The professor jumped in place. “Your students helped plenty today, in their own way. Besides, I’m sure you managed to get back all my hats from Rumpel’s office, right?”

The floating woman groaned. “Yes. Took the entire period, and his little traps even burned my best scarf,” she showed off the end of her red scarf, now scorched.

Hugo snorted. Madame Yaga shot him an icy look, as did Varian. “Sorry, sorry,” the blond muttered.

“I’m still not giving them time off,” Yaga said, staring down at her students.

Nimble chuckled. “Sure, Baba. Sure.”

With that, Madame Yaga floated away on her stool, murmuring about sending her students back on their way.

Still standing with the roommates, the professor sighed. “I suppose that old box of wires needed some more urgent care than I thought. At last, you were using your time wisely on something real, rather than pretending to do magic with your friend here.”

Varian’s jaw hung open. Hugo just looked tired. Nimble acknowledged their gawking expressions. “Oh, I’d never fault a student for some hijinx. You know, I once had a student avoid giving a presentation by stuffing her face with pretzels and talking gibberish! I gave her an A,” The professor laughed a little too loud for Varian’s liking.

Hugo ahemed. “You don’t care that I wasn’t really using magic to help?”

Professor B. Nimble snorted. “What do I care if you use magic or not?”

Hugo looked both ready to strangle someone. Most likely the professor. Varian didn’t have time to dwell on it.

“Cause you said Madame Yaga asked you to!” Varian said. “It was why my class came here today.”

The professor continued to wear his humor on his sleeve, chuckling up a storm. “The oh-so-esteem Madame Yaga lost a very lucrative game of cards the other day. In place of funds, the promise of help for my drama class was offered, and I happily accepted. I’m sure Madame Yaga only said that to make this seem more important. I haven’t been paying attention to anyone’s use of magic.”

Varian glanced at Hugo, half expecting him to be bursting a blood vessel in his brain. But instead, Hugo’s eyes were back to the curtain switch board box.

“So,” Hugo said, slowly. “Would you mind if I kept working on—”

“Oh, by all means.” Professor B. Nimble shrugged. “You seem like you have a grasp of it.” With that, the professor skipped back to the doors of the charmatorium and let back in the other students, along with Madame Yaga who’d succeeded in calming everyone down.

“This,” Hugo started, his tone deadpanned. “Was the stupid thing we’ve ever done.”

“No it wasn’t!” Varian countered, as it was a serious statement. But, when he looked at Hugo, he could tell from the soft, genuine smile he wore that he didn’t mean a word he said.

“Wait, I thought you said you fixed the box,” Varian asked.

Hugo leaned his head from side to side. “I did. But, I’m betting I can keep improving it while I’m here.”

Varian chuckled. “That’s stupid—”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it—”

“That’s a horrible bet to take. You already know that you can do that, easily. Rigged much?”

Hugo beamed. He actually fucking beamed. Varian enjoyed the reminder that his opinion mattered to his roommate almost as much as he enjoyed just seeing his friend happy. His annoying, unbearable, somehow still worth helping, friend.

By the end of the class, Varian practically had to drag Hugo away from the box. Once he did, Varian was ecstatic to find that Hugo was the one to start the conversation on the way out. As they strolled together, Eugene and Lance not far behind in the crowd of students, Eugene stared back and forth between the two roommates, who looked utterly enraptured with the conversation. The actually calm conversation.

Lance whispered something to Eugene. A terrible look of realization appeared on his face. “What?! No!” He shouted this so loudly that Varian and Hugo heard him.

“What’s his problem?” Hugo asked.

Varian shrugged. “Not sure. I’m not looking to be a part of any more hijinx today.”

Hugo nodded sagely. “I completely agree.”

Sure enough, Madame Yaga's previous strong words in the charmatorium stayed true, as Varian and Hugo ended up being two of the only students she DID award excused absences to. From the look

on her face, it was clear that this honor was of a “you did great!” moment, and more of a “I don’t want to see your faces for at least a week” situation. Hugo and Varian celebrated this victory by immediately running out of the class after it was done and bolting back to their dorm for lunch. Somewhere between the time it took to shut the door and figure out how to breathe again, Hugo broke the comfortable silence of their room.

“So,” the blond leaned against Varian’s bed post, tapping his finger nails against it, “You’ve been trying to figure out what’s wrong with me?”

Instantly, Varian felt a rush of relief that Hugo was willing to talk to him about this, and that Varian himself could be honest about his desire to help. Still, his wording bugged him.

“Uh, hold on. I’ve been researching what’s *up* with your *magic*, and how best to deal with it. Not what’s *wrong* with you.” Varian sat up on his bed, pointing to him. “What’s wrong with you would be an entirely separate, more extensive, problem to research, Glasses.”

Hugo let out a stilted “ha. ha.” at that one, before flipping him off. “Pray tell, what’re your findings, Goggles?” He asked. Varian was happy to share. It wasn’t much. Most of the findings were about what this problem wasn’t, rather than the better answer of what it actually was. Inevitably, with little less to go on, and even in spite of his mother’s notes suggesting this was the wrong direction to go, Varian found one decent path of logic to follow.

“Let’s say this is a bookmark,” Varian started.

“Let’s not, cause it isn’t,” Hugo said, echoing more than just Ulla’s sentiments. “I’m not my mother’s biological son, so I didn’t inherit whatever these problems with magic actually are.”

Varian flapped his hands, shushing Hugo. “But let’s say it is. Would it affect machines?”

Hugo blinked. “Come again?”

Varian’s mind ran a million miles a minute as he spoke. “I’ve been thinking about it. If this is a bookmark, or even just a curse that works like a Sorcerer’s Apprentice bookmark and causes *your* magic to backfire, then maybe using a machine as a conduit to perform magic would make it work. Like when you make potions! It doesn’t affect that at all, when you aren’t using your own magic. So, maybe using magic through machines, technically non-magical devices, would work. In some capacity.”

Hugo blinked again.

Varian stepped forward, taking Hugo’s hand. “I mean, it’s worth looking into, isn’t it?”

Hugo snapped out of his trance enough that he was thinking thoughts again.

“Well that’s a stupid idea,” Hugo scoffed. “I expect better from you, Farm Boy.”

“Well I don’t hear you offering up any bright ideas, your highness.”

“That’s because,” Hugo shuffled through his desk drawer. He took out several sheets of blueprint paper. “I already have several.”

Varian’s mouth hung open, blubbing like a fish. “Since when?”

“Well,” Hugo started, backing away. “I didn’t draw it up exactly for this. During our project, before Legacy Day, I drew up a few different ideas; I wasn’t planning on using any of them though.”

Something about the glint in Hugo’s green eyes told Varian that while he didn’t initially *plan* to make any of these, he needed no further convincing to go ahead with it. After all, he didn’t have to spend every waking second trying to be useful to one person or another. Varian knew that a single day would not change a belief created over a lifetime, but it was a start.

“And, for the record,” Hugo pointed a finger in Varian’s face, flicking his forehead. “It already crossed my mind to use a machine to deal with my curse. I’ve just been too busy to do it.”

Varian nodded in mock understanding. “Right, right.”

“I also wasn’t crazy enough to try it out yet, as my curse might just explode like everything else I’ve done lately. Maybe I’ll test it out in our room, just in case.”

“Oh, joy.” Varian rolled his eyes. Ultimately, though, he felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. It wasn’t much, but he was helping his friend. Not because he feared being replaced or vice versa, but simply because he wanted to. That’s what friends are for.

Hugo snickered, clearly proud of his jest, before an even better one struck him. So much better, in fact, that it wasn’t a jest. It was an idea. “Then again, depending on the design, a field demonstration would be better.” Varian raised an eyebrow at him, crossing his arms. Hugo stared down at Varian, fixing his glasses, one hand on his hip. “You’re still doing that Finders Keepers game soon, right?”

Chapter End Notes

Did I say this was Hugo’s flop era? I misspoke. It’s actually his fullmetal era. My bad!

Holy shit this chapter ended up longer than I expected it to be. The title ended up being a reflection of my thoughts as a writer as much as the chapter itself. God I love breaking characters down and then placing them under a microscope in the aftermath :) Next chapter will probably be the most fun chapter I’ve written for this story in a long while, so get ready y’all. I’m aiming to get it out in the next two weeks!

I hope you enjoyed reading! As always, remember to take care of yourself, make plans ahead of time, and DRINK SOME WATER!!

Fuck Around and Find Out

Chapter Summary

Varian and Hugo team up to win the game Finders Keepers.

Chapter Notes

HELLO READERS HELLO READERS HELLO WHAT'S UP HELLO WHAT'S UP

Wow this chapter ended up way longer than I ever imagined it would be. I considered making it a two parter, but that didn't pan out. So, today you all get a full five course meal. The kitchen is ablaze. The house is burning down. Why did you let me cook???

Seriously though, thank you all for your patience. I hope you enjoy it!! I think you will!!!! :))

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Varian furiously scribbled away in his notebook.

If he'd looked up, he would've seen his roommate, Hugo, looking entirely amused. But Varian didn't look up, so he didn't see that and thus was not bothered by it. Even if he had looked up, he wouldn't have been bothered. At this point, he was used to Hugo's attitude and demeanor in the best and worst of times.

"Goggles," Hugo started, caught between curiosity and confusion, "all I asked was what are the rules."

"And I'm answering your question."

Varian ripped the finished page out of its plain school notebook, handing it to his roommate. "This should explain everything," he said with a smile, then paused. "Wait maybe not everything—"

Hugo held him back. "Live with your mistakes," he said, reading through the (probably) complete list of rules.

Finders Keepers.

First and foremost, the object (this year it's the flute you, Hugo, made) being found must be hidden by a third party, as decided by the players ahead of time. This third party will have no part in the game after hiding the object.

“Who’s that going to be?” Hugo asked.

“Owl.”

“Owl?”

“Owl. Cassandra’s pet owl.”

“Yeah but what’s his name?”

“Owl.”

“I know what he is, I’m asking his name.”

“Owl.”

“Are you fucking with me right now?”

“Not even a little.”

The camera which will determine the winner is set up and the timer starts. Once the timer starts, the game begins.

“Camera?”

“It confirms the winner,” Varian clarified. “At the end of the game, a timer attached to it goes off and it takes a photo. Whoever is pictured with the flute is the undisputed winner. The first year we did this we didn’t have anything to signify the winner and—” A memory from the first game came to his mind.

“Obviously, I won,” Cass said.

The veteran finders keepers players of the group (basically everyone except Nuru, Yong, and Hugo) immediately began arguing. Loudly.

While it was eventually determined that, yes, Cass won, it was a bloody discussion.

Varian shivered. “Trust me. It’s for the best to have a photo finish.”

As soon as the object is found, it will no longer be permissible to hide it. Bags, backpacks, etc are allowed as long as someone has them in arms reach. You are not allowed to hide it in a third location. At any given time after the object is found, a player must be in direct possession of it. It cannot be given to a pet or animal; this counts as hiding.

Hugo sighed. He reached over to pet Olivia, lounging sleepily on Ruddiger’s back. Varian felt a similar bedrugging reluctance to leave his furry friend behind, but it was probably for the best

considering the next rule.

Use of magic, magical items, alchemy, trickery, is all permitted.

“Well that’s a given,” Hugo said. “I can’t imagine *you* being able to resist using all that shit, even while barred from doing magic outside of class. Non-magical destiny and all.”

“At this point, if they haven’t kicked me out of my magical classes yet, I doubt they’re gonna.” Varian thought he heard Hugo mutter something like ‘I hope not’. He set the thought aside.

“Honestly, though, the rule isn’t there *just* for me. While I’m the one who most often uses those things, this game sometimes leads my friends to be more...” he struggled to find the right word.

“Reckless?” Hugo asked, counting fingers. “Incautious? Irresponsible with magic, alchemy, trickery, etc?”

“Creative,” Varian settled on.

Physical combat in competition is allowed to the extent of bruising and scrapes. Anything life threatening immediately warrants a pause to the game, regardless of circumstances or whereabouts, until injuries sustained are dealt with. The camera timer will not be stopped.

“I’ve gotta ask: How often does violence occur in this game?”

“More than you’d prefer, less than you’d expect.”

“Well alright then.”

Whoever is in possession of the object must have their photo taken by the designated, timer-controlled camera when it goes off at the end of the game. The location of the camera must be agreed on ahead of time, by a majority vote.

“Did that vote already happen?” Hugo asked.

Varian nodded, reluctantly.

Hugo paused. “Where’s the camera being set up this year?”

Varian did not answer.

“Where’s the camera being set up?” Hugo asked again.

Varian still said nothing.

“ *Where* , Goggles?”

Defeated, he gestured around their dorm room.

Hugo took off his glasses, putting his head in his hands.

“For the record,” Varian patted his back. “I was outvoted. They want to have the post-game festivities here afterward, so they wanted to start here too,” he paused, before his tone grew more serious. “I can tell them to go somewhere else afterward, if you want your space.”

Head still in one hand, Hugo shook his glasses at his roommate. “Ask me again after the game.”

If alliances wish to share the win, they must all be photographed holding the object together.

“Any questions?”

Hugo stared at the piece of paper his roommate had handed him. He read each line twice before he answered.

“Only one,” he took Varian’s hand. “Does this mean we get to hold hands?” his tone took on a comical, sugary sweet air, his expression the picture of hope.

Varian looked at him, stone-faced.

Hugo didn’t back down.

“Yeah—” Varian started. “Just for the photo!”

The taller student snorted. The shorter cut him off before he could say something smug, yanking his hand back in the process. “That is, if we’re working together.”

Hugo scoffed. “As if I’d want anyone else by my side.”

Funny. His tone didn’t have as much of an overly sweet air to it that time.

“Okay, for real, I do have one more question,” Hugo said, so serious it looped back around to unseriousness. “Why do you do this to yourself?”

Varian rolled his eyes.

The game was set for a Saturday, free of obstacles of classes. The less hindrances present that day, the better. Varian wasted no time. He awoke early (before his alarm even went off), made coffee (enough for himself and his roommate) and muttered (borderline shouting) that today was the day! He was determined to put in 110% effort. He’d prepared all that he could, and was ready to improvise where he needed, stuffing his cargo pants pockets with as many supplies as his satchel held.

At this point in the school year, the trees had all turned their autumn shades. Predictably, a chill had returned to the air around Ever After High. Varian himself had brought a nicer jacket for today's game, loose fitting and comfortable. He planned to wear the coat tied around his waist until needed. Whether the game would take place mostly inside or outside was yet to be seen, as was typical for Finders Keepers.

As Varian slipped his goggles over his hair, checking in the mirror and spotting a few blue bits of hair still stuck in the bands, he snuck a peak at the other side of the room in the reflection.

Hugo, who'd awoke and nearly finished getting ready while Varian was busy with his own shit, stood collecting his hair, hanging over his undercut, pulling it up in his usual ponytail. His style didn't change from day to day, all too happy to play the part he'd been given. Corset, fancy-ish white shirt, fingerless gloves, etc, all combining to make him appear capable, comfortable, and cool all at once. Today was surely going to test that image. Nobody looked all put together by the end of this game. Varian knew from experience.

A part of him wondered if his half-jacket would be enough to ward off the chilly air. Peculiarly, despite the need to fend off the cold, Hugo rolled up the sleeves to his elbows. As he made his way over to his bed, rummaging through the junk he kept under it, he finally noticed Varian looking at him.

"I'm not showing you my device, Goggles," Hugo said, pointedly.

Ah yes. *The device*. "Yeah, I know," Varian went back to his own shit. "Wasn't gonna ask."

Hugo's expression changed to one of mirth. "So you were staring cause I'm pretty, then?" He asked, a little too pleased. Varian was too caught up between a glare and a stutter to give a definitive answer. "You flatter me," the blond didn't give him a chance. "But flattery isn't gonna change anything. If I show you it now, you'll want to see how it works. I've already decided, I'm testing my machine during the game and not a moment sooner."

That had been made obvious over the past week. Hugo had spent much of his free time (aside from helping with decoding Ulla's notes) working on his new invention. A way to use machinery to conjure magic. Whenever he used straight up magic, disaster occurred. Artificially magical infused objects didn't work for Hugo either, being just as affected by his "curse" as his own spells were. So, wands and other items that had been given magic by someone were off the table.

But magic was more than just what magicians added to objects. Many naturally growing magical items existed all around, in plants, rocks, all kinds of places. Items used in potion making, the one facet of magic that seemed unaffected by his curse; probably because he didn't have to use any of his own magic (or anyone else's) to do it.

With each passing day, Varian believed more firmly that this "curse" his roommate coped with was actually a bookmark. According to Ulla's notes, bookmarks were thought to be a genetic quirk of those whose families harbored magical destinies. Hugo's "curse" acted just like an expected bookmark for a future Sorcerer's Apprentice should. Granted, this was only a theory. Hugo was adopted. He *shouldn't* have a bookmark at all. Still, Varian couldn't rule out the idea. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he considered that perhaps the current definition of bookmarks, the one Ulla had written about, was just plain incorrect.

Regardless of the origin of his curse, Hugo was set on creating a machine that could help him use magic in the manners he still could. And, unfortunately, he didn't want Varian to see it at all until it

was ready. He'd even set up Olivia as an alarm system. Anytime Varian even got close to the fabric covered lump on his desk, she would start screeching bloody murder, followed by Hugo himself running back in and dragging Varian away (not literally... Okay ONE time literally). While it was annoying as hell, Varian could respect the showmanship. He'd have done the same.

Varian put on his most pompous expression. "Well, can't say I blame you. I've been told my approval is rather valuable," he said, thriving off the knowledge that Hugo valued his opinion higher than basically anyone they knew.

"Very subtle, Goggles," Hugo said.

"Thank you. I try," Varian said quickly.

Then, his phone buzzed. A text from his friends. They were late. "I'm gonna see what's keeping them," he slung his carrier bag across his body. He had to prepare for the possibility of competitors trying to take it from him, should he be the one with the object.

"Always on the move," Hugo mused.

"Would you have me any other way?" Varian said, entirely confident.

"Of course not," Hugo said, smirking like he always did when he had something clever to say. "I ___"

As soon as he opened the door, he was met with the faces of his friends (and an owl; causing a nearby robotic mouse to screech). They brushed past the duo. The room went from two occupants to eight as all those participating in the game came pouring in. In Rapunzel's hands was an old camera and camera-stand. Next to her, Eugene, in closest proximity to Varian, pulled the shorter student under his arm, spinning him around and guiding him back into the room. "Hey!" Varian protested.

"The violence has begun," Hugo said, monotone.

Nuru elbowed him lightly in the gut. "Oops. You said we were starting the violence."

"Not till the camera's ready," Rapunzel called to them, serious and enthusiastic all at once.

"I can help," Yong ran over to her.

As he jumped to assist the blonde with the longest hair, Cassandra calmly walked to the window, handed Owl the flute, and watched him fly away with the object in his claws.

Hugo scurried back to his bed, making a beeline for the pillow, lifting it gently. "Liv? Bird's gone." Olivia burst out from her hiding spot.

Yong, abandoning the camera, ran up to the pair. "Oh! She's scared of birds?"

"One that eats mice, yeah," Hugo petted her shiny ear.

Lance coughed. "Isn't she made of metal though? It's not like they would eat her."

Eugene, of all people, spoke first. "Most people are scared of spiders. Those don't eat people do they?" He pointed out.

Hugo hummed. “Thanks for the defense.”

“I’m not defending you,” Eugene said. “I’m defending your mouse.”

A hooting from the window ended the argument. Owl sat, claws empty of the flute. From under the window, Ruddiger tried to swat at the bird, who remained unperturbed. Olivia hid again, this time under the raccoon’s tail.

Finished setting the camera up, Rapunzel called Varian to her side. “The game starts in three...” She set the timer, this time to the maximum setting.

“Two,” Rapunzel said. Varian then cast a small spell on the timer, as he always did for Finders Keepers. The timer instantly slowed, the pauses between its ticks moving at a snail’s pace. It would run until a little after sunset, as was previously agreed on.

Rapunzel bounced in place. She resembled a firecracker, ready to blow. “One— Okay go!”

She was the first to spirited away, dashing out the room, no doubt towards the Enchanted Forest, in the direction Owl had flown. Eugene followed close after her. Then Yong, Nuru, Cassandra. Lastly, Lance went for a more relaxed pace.

Not moving at all were Varian and Hugo. The former of the two turned to the window. Taking out a vial of dark green liquid. He uttered the spell needed for this particular mixture, watching it glow brighter, then dumped it all on the semi-far ground below.

“Now we see if you followed my directions correctly,” Hugo said, He quickly grabbed two last items from his side of the room. First, a tool belt with several concealed items in its compartments. Second, a nicer bag than his roommate’s, which must have held his invention.

“It wasn’t *that* complex a mixture,” Varian defended. “If you wanted to, you could’ve done it yourself. You only need me to do the last bit with the spell.”

“And for that I’m grateful,” Hugo feigned gratitude. He leaned onto Varian, literally weighing him down, acting like he was fainting. “What a wonderful friend I have. So kind. So smart. So—”

“Shut up.” Varian fought against his roommate’s weight, laughter bubbling from his glaring mouth.

Then, on the ground below, the liquid formed into a round green surface with the appearance of jello. Hugo gestured for Varian to go first, which he did, dropping out the window and onto the chemically-made cushion. He adjusted the bag across his body, careful that his supplies were undamaged. Hugo followed after, keeping his eyes closed for the fall. He kept them closed even after he landed, taking a deep deliberate breath in and out, composing himself carefully.

Right, heights, Varian remembered with a start. He suddenly felt guilty for suggesting this method of leaving the room. It was the speediest, and he had fun making the substance to do so, but he wanted Hugo to enjoy this game. He elected to try and avoid height situations from here on out, same as he was trying to avoid any plans that could result in bloodshed. The less confrontation with phobias, the more enjoyable the game would be.

With that settled, the pair headed for the Enchanted Forest, keeping a brisk pace as they walked. Neither were in a hurry. With Varian’s determination, and alchemical knowledge, he knew they’d be

the first to track the flute down, regardless of who's physically the fastest. Either way, the game would be the same. Whoever finds it has to keep it away from everyone else with all their might.

The Enchanted Forest surrounded half the school, spreading out for miles. That left a lot of ground to cover. While this seemed like a ludicrous starting point to Hugo (who made his opinion known to his roommate, repeatedly), Varian wasn't too concerned. They'd had far more perilous starting points in previous years' games. Comparatively, the Enchanted Forest wasn't that bad. Most of it wasn't even actually enchanted; just pretty.

The usual wild flora and fauna surrounded the duo as they walked, the kind you would find in any untouched stretch of land. The trees in their full autumn bloom, covered in red, orange, and yellow. The breeze was cool. If it was too chilly for Hugo in his half-jacket, he didn't say so. As they walked, they'd occasionally run around unusual sights: trees that formed perfectly round archways, a pack of baby griffins, rocks with gems sprouting from within, flowers that seemed to follow movement with unseen eyes, rays of light that *literally* sparkled. At one point they even saw a stone well brimming with multicolored water. The well vanished soon after. Weird.

They even encountered a lightning tree; a favorite stop of those kinds of fireflies that could produce real fire, redundantly named fire-fireflies. Their comings and goings on and off the tree's bark filled the air with a popping, crackling sound.

Opportunist Hugo collected several of the tree's fallen leaves.

"Need those for an assignment?" Varian asked. Lightning tree leaves were useful, but they required being broken up and mixed thoroughly to be made into any solution worthwhile.

"Just being proactive. That's all."

Varian let him do his thing, taking a moment to appreciate the tree itself. A few fire-fireflies floated around. Calmly, Varian stayed out of their way, not wanting to be set on fire today. Their focus was on the tree anyway.

"Maybe don't stand so close to the literal lightning rod of nature, Goggles," Hugo suggested. "You're no fire-firefly. Not exactly immune to lightning."

"They aren't immune," Varian shot back. "They're fireproof, and sturdy. Even if lightning hits while they're on the tree, they aren't knocked off by the force. The goop they make from chewing up the leaves and spitting them on their legs keeps them in place. The force of the wind when lightning hits the tree makes the goop solidify. When the force solidifying it stops, it loosens and they fly away unharmed, having eaten all that energy from the lightning and ready for more—"

Varian stopped talking. Hugo was staring at him strangely, expression thoughtful.

"You're such a nerd," Hugo said, hiding his mouth behind his hand. Varian assumed he was trying not to laugh.

"Hey!" Unable to come up with something witty in return, given how unwitty the insult had been, Varian crossed his arms. "As if you aren't just as bad as me."

Hugo dropped his hand. He was smiling. “I say it with love, Goggles,” he leaned into his space. Varian fought not to roll his eyes. He lost that fight.

As they walked, Varian got to work on his plan for narrowing down the compass’ location. He didn’t want to get it started until he was sure that they were away from the rest of the group, as he didn’t want them to know the trick he had up his sleeve.

The further they walked into the forest, the thicker and taller the trees around them became, blocking out more and more sunlight. This wasn’t exactly making them blind, but it did turn the coolness in the air even chillier. For now they were traveling the direction that Owl might have gone. But, Varian had something that was nearly ready to confirm their path. He worked on finishing it as they walked.

“Are you done yet?” Hugo asked. Unlike Hugo, Varian wasn’t cruel enough to keep his plans and inventions on a need-to-know basis. At least, not with his roommate. For the most part. He’d told the blond previously that he had a plan for finding the flute. He hadn’t divulged the details just yet. “I’m getting tired of waiting for this ‘grand plan’ of ours to pan out.”

“Our plan?” Varian asked. “Look at you being a supportive team player,” he said, throwing in his own brand of sarcasm. “I’m just taking a page from your book, and keeping it a surprise.”

Hugo, to Varian’s disappointment, simply shrugged. “Okay.”

Varian cracked. “It’s a tracking potion.”

Hugo blinked in surprise. Then, he laughed. “You are so easy to—” he missed a beat. “Wait, what? Goggles, last time I checked, the flute was made of metal. I should know. I made it. Tracking potions only work on *living* things.”

Varian could forgive Hugo for being skeptical. Magically tracking animals and people wasn’t difficult (Varian had literally seen Hugo do so back during the blue-pets incident), but objects and other non-organic matter were trickier. Even more so if the thing being tracked was magical, like a cursed object or magic staff. *That* was unheard of. Luckily, the flute was neither; it was a normal object. Still difficult, but not impossible. It would take more than a typical tracking potion, and an ingenious mind.

“Back when I was on the farm,” Varian explained, still working on the solution as he walked. “Here we go,” Hugo murmured. The alchemist ignored him. “Ruddiger had a bad habit of stealing wooden spoons and burying them in the fields. Eventually, my dad stopped buying new spoons and told me ‘that’s your raccoon, so you go find what he’s stealing’ which, alright fair enough. There were a lot of missing spoons. Anyway, a metal detector wasn’t gonna work, since they were made of wood, so I had to try finding them another way. At first I tried your standard tracking spell, using Ruddiger’s fur and saliva but that kept leading me to *him*, not the shit he hid. So, after finding one of the spoons on my own, I crushed and mixed some of the wood with the usual tracking spell. That didn’t work on its own, so I fermented it mixture over the course of a week to allow for more potency. I did the same this week with a scrap of the metal you used on the flute.”

Hugo hummed, still unconvinced. “The fermentation would help, sure, but that would still cancel out—”

“Holly root,” Varian continued, pulling said root out of his pocket. He hadn’t brought any alchemy or chemical supplies with him today, trusting his knowledge of magic to get him through. However,

since he knew he'd be using this solution, he brought some of it with him. "Not the most magical thing in the world, but its chemical composition mitigates the cancelation that fermentation usually causes."

"That still doesn't account for the range tracking spells should have. Was it a glow type?" Most tracking spells were just the liquid in a glass vial, glowing brighter the closer a person came to the tracked animal or human.

Varian mixed the week-long fermented solution with the newly added holly root. "Nope. If I made the range too wide, the glowing wouldn't show me where to look. It would change over and over again." He cast a small heat spell, boiling it all (thank goodness he wore his rubber gloves for this part).

With his free hand, Varian brought out a small circular object from his bag.

"So, instead, I used a compass. Just a few drops and it led me to every spoon we'd lost." He opened the protective glass and poured the contents of the small vial into it, moving it around carefully so the interior was totally covered. "This compass is getting more than a few drops, so the range should be wide enough, and accurate."

After a moment, the needle spun wildly before stopping in a single direction.

"And," Varian started, stretching out the syllables, waiting. As he watched the solution change color. "We're on our way," he moved faster in the pointed-at direction, leaving Hugo to keep up.

The arrow of the compass eventually led them to a tall, old tree with many winding branches. No matter where they stood around the tree, the needle pointed to it. *Owl probably dropped it up there*, he thought. As they both scanned the branches, trying to spot the flute from the ground, Hugo looked a little paler than usual.

Varian said nothing, deciding to scale the tree by himself. "Would your mysterious "device" be any good in this situation?" He asked, not wanting to push his roommate to do more than he was comfortable with.

"I'd rather not waste it on something this underwhelming," Hugo groaned, before joining in the climb.

"Come on," Varian called down, trying to quell his lack of enthusiasm. "This is part of the experience."

"Part of the experience," Hugo echoed mockingly, before his voice became quieter. "All this for an unproven tracking potion that may have brought us in the wrong direction."

"I heard that!"

"Good!"

By the time he actually caught up with Varian, they were much higher on the tree. Hugo looked all too conscious of that. It was obvious that he was fighting the impulse to look down. "Just give me a sec. Catch my breath," he said, breathing just fine, eyes now closed.

“Me too,” Varian said. He didn’t feel nervous at all, but felt it best not to burst his bubble. In the meantime, he double checked the compass, but the arrow kept pointing forward, rather than up or down. It was pointing in Hugo’s direction.

Aside from the barely concealed fear on his face, he looked nice today. Green was a nice color on him. The rolled up sleeves were peculiar, although it did lead Varian to believe that the device he’d come up with would have some hands-on aspect. His first thought had been some kind of mechanical wand, but that didn’t feel right. Hugo was more resourceful than that—

At last, Hugo opened his eyes. He blinked at Varian, coughing suddenly. “What is it?”

Varian blinked. He’d been staring. “Nothing,” he suddenly felt like looking anywhere else. Behind Hugo’s head! Yep! That’s a good start. It was a great start, actually. Just past the mop of blond hair, Varian saw a sliver of metal that had no business being in a tree.

“There it is!” Varian exclaimed. In his hurry to grab it, he ended up throwing himself into Hugo’s personal space.

“Easy!” Hugo all but yelped.

“Sorry, sorry,” Varian jumped away, knocking the flute to the ground. One of his shoes slipped on the branch he’d been standing on, sending him falling for an instant, before a hand seized his forearm. He scrambled to get his footing. “Thanks.”

Hugo was white-knuckling a branch with one hand, and Varian’s arm in the other. “Let’s just get down.”

His demeanor improved vastly once they were back on the grass. He fixed his glasses, sights stuck on Varian, and his compass; simply put, he looked stunned.

Where’s that skepticism now? Varian thought. “I happen to know what I’m doing, if you weren’t aware,” he teased.

Hugo chuckled. “Trust me, I’m *too* aware,” his voice melding into curiosity. “Never seen a tracking solution for an inanimate object actually work before.”

“Well,” Varian beamed, shoving the flute into his bag. “You have to get creative with your sciences when you learn them from an unofficial alchemist and self-teach everything else.” Sometimes he had to remind himself that, yeah, up until this year he’d never formally been taught magic or alchemy, and only bits and pieces of science.

Hugo looked borderline mesmerized. He wore it well. “Like I said, I’m aware. It doesn’t surprise me at all that *you* came up with this.” Varian savored the compliment before the silence broke again. “And since it doesn’t surprise me, guess that makes me a good judge of character,” Hugo said, smoothing his jacket. “All around, this is a win for me.”

Unbelievable. Varian shook his head.

Then they were not alone.

A powerful gust of wind blew through them. Then it came back the other way, then back again, on and on leaving both roommates disoriented and struggling to stay on their feet. Whoever (this had

to be a 'who'. The game had started) was doing this made use of their confusion, finally rushing forward and cutting the straps of Varian's bag. Whoever did so did it with expert precision. The cut was precise, not even grazing Varian himself. Before the bag could hit the ground, the speeding wind took it away. The sound of movement dissipated, leaving silence.

They were alone again.

They didn't even have time to process what the hell just happened, why it happened, or who actually took the flute from them.

Once more, they were not alone.

"Varian and Hugo! You have something that belongs to us!" A voice full of sunny determination shouted.

Opposite the path of the wind, barefoot atop an exposed branch of a tree, stood Rapunzel. "Hand over the flute to us before things get wishy washy!"

"Wishy washy?" Varian murmured.

"Us?" Hugo muttered.

Rapunzel looked quite serious. She was holding an oval object; it looked like a horseshoe, or a headband.

Varian frowned. If she'd been the one to cause all that wind that cut and took away his bag, she should be halfway out of the forest by now. But here she was. She must've known they found it, but not what just occurred to take it away. Varian saw no need to lie to her. He told her point blank that they didn't have the flute. She believed him, knowing deception wasn't part of his playbook. "You don't? But you just—" She blinked, looking around. "Wait, where'd he go?"

"You piece of shit!" A distant voice shrieked from within the trees, from the same direction the wind had gone. *Cassandra?*

"Sweetheart!" Another shrieked. *Eugene. Definitely Eugene.* Of course he had an alliance with Rapunzel. From out of the thick of trees, Eugene came running. Specifically, he came running *through* the trees, as if he were a ghost. Varian's bag was in his hands. "Three seconds!"

Rapunzel seemed to understand his meaning. She moved the object in her hand up to her head. It was a headband! The moment she put it on, her blonde hair changed into... water?

Four seconds after his words, Eugene all collided with Rapunzel. But, instead of running through her like the trees, the physical barrier between them remained. Then the water that now flowed like a rapid river from Rapunzel's head surrounded them, turning to a shell of ice.

Cassandra reached the ice right as it froze completely.

"You chicken shit son of a—" she cut herself off, pulling a sword out of its sheath at her side. She hit the ice, but it didn't even chip. She circled the ice dome that now surrounded the two, before backing up. She got into an offensive stance, holding her new sword. Then she was gone, a gust of wind and a blur of her form left in her wake, before suddenly reappearing, the edge of her sword colliding with the ice dome. It didn't even chip. She swung again, seemingly out of frustration. This

time she didn't leave the spot where she stood, but another gust of wind followed anyway, hitting the dome and leaving not even a scratch.

A safe distance away, Varian and Hugo exchanged a look. ' *Creative* ' methods.

It was then that Varian put two and two together. Cassandra *was* that wind. She took his bag. She took the flute! At least, before Eugene stole it from her. His stupor turned to outrage.

"You said you'd stay away!"

"Until the flute was found," Cass said, unphased. "How'd you find it anyhow? Got an alchemist trick up your sleeve?" She glanced at Hugo. "Or some kind of Sorcerer scam?"

Varian couldn't help but sigh, relieved at least one of his competitors hadn't noticed, or realized, the advantage the compass provided. He kept it safely tucked away in one of his pockets. Although which one, he couldn't remember.

"We're not telling you that." Varian said, finally, stumbling over his words, "And forget about how I— How did you do *that* ? That wind, running, sword—" he stopped. Her blade had a very strange shine to it. *Magic. Duh.*

"That's a neat trick," Hugo said, eyes still on her sword. "Where did you get a thing like that?" She didn't respond, still standing ready to strike again; hopefully at the ice dome and not at them. "You know what, it doesn't matter," he continued. "I'm pretty sure that's a 'Blade of Grass ' . Makes a lot of wind, speeds up the user, blah blah blah. I've read about them. The school has a few in storage. As for this," he gestured to the ice dome, "My guess is that your blonde friend got a hold of one of the many elemental magic items this school tucks behind closed doors. This kind is usually called a 'Band of Water'. If that's the case, then your sword isn't gonna do shit to this ice."

Cassandra paused, finally meeting his gaze head on. From her expression, it seemed like Hugo was correct in his assessment of her weapon, so the same was most likely true for Rapunzel's new accessory. In that case...

"A regular fire summoning spell won't help either," Varian added, semi-familiar with the item Hugo spoke of, and not definitely a little peeved that Hugo figured out what Rapunzel's headband was before he did. Not at all. Nope. "I can make a liquid solution out of dragon flakes that might do the trick though." He got to work digging through his bag, trying to find the vial of the flakes, and a few other chemicals, that he'd brought along. It wasn't a complex potion, but it would take a few minutes. He'd need to use a heating spell to mix it together.

Behind Varian, there was a rustling sound, as though someone (presumably Hugo) was reaching into their own pockets, bag, or tool belt. Clinking glass objects, organizing and choosing.

"You don't happen to have dragon flakes, do you?" Varian asked, not looking at his roommate.

A moment more of rustling, then Hugo groaned. "No, unfortunately. I should've, but—"

Varian nodded, still looking through his own shit. Something always fell through the cracks. He was beginning to worry that he hadn't packed the substance either. *I could've sworn...*

At last, he found what he was looking for: dragon flakes. Just enough for the solution he needed.

Suddenly, a very cold hand landed on Varian's shoulder. It was a glove. A metal glove, stretching about halfway up Hugo's forearm. Peeking out along the surface, spaced out like knuckles, were the tops of cylinder-shaped features. Tubes that seemed to run from the fingers to the arm, where it more clearly showed their empty compartments with openable latches. One or two of them already had some multicolored liquids inside. In between these sections, the metal was more broken up, like it'd been made from many fine pieces, similar to hefty chainmail. Skeletal in appearance, clearly still under construction to some extent, yet it didn't look at all flimsy, with enough room for additional, finer systems beneath the top layer of metals.

When Varian finally tore his gaze from the glove (he hadn't stared for long, promise) he found his roommate smirking at him. Then, with his other, non-metallic gloved hand, Hugo plucked the vial of dragon flakes from Varian's grasp.

"Thanks, Goggles."

Hugo waltzed toward the dome. He placed the vial into one of the empty tubes. There was an audible click of machinery. Hugo knelt to where the ice met the ground, pointing a metal finger to its exterior. Then, he stood, still tracing the dome, leaving a smoking, melting line in his wake. His path created a door-like shape, which, once he finished by meeting the ground again, he stood and kicked in. The ice shattered on the ground. Inside, Rapunzel and Eugene jumped back to avoid the impact.

Hugo looked anything but displeased. "You know, you really should keep long hair out of the way, whether it's made of water or not," he turned his head, showing off his neat and tidy ponytail. "Less likely to get damaged that way." The finger of the glove he'd used to dispense the substance was still smoking slightly. Hugo blew it out.

Varian did not think that was cool. He did not. He definitely did not.

He did.

"Eugene?" Rapunzel asked, the full question unspoken. She stood defensively in front of him. Her boyfriend checked the ticking watch on his wrist, before shaking his head almost imperceptibly.

Varian suddenly remembered what Eugene had shouted earlier: "*Three seconds!*" Whatever was allowing him to do that trick of moving like a ghost, it had a time limitation and probably a charging period too. If Varian had to guess, he'd say the watch itself was the source of that magic (Eugene hated wearing watches, so Varian couldn't see another reason for him to wear one today). But that was priority number two. Priority one was the bag Eugene was holding. *Varian's* bag.

"We'll be taking the flute back now, please and thank you," Varian held out his hand.

Rapunzel looked frustrated, like she was trying to get the 'Band of Water' to help. When she couldn't make it do anything, at least for the time being, she gestured for Eugene to toss it over. Which he did! He checked to see that the flute was still in there. It was! Yay! Then Varian heard the whoosh of a blade. He turned to see Cassandra still holding her sword. Oh no!

"Great work you two," she said, relaxed. "You're about to lose the object of the game twice in less than ten minutes. Must be a new record."

Before Varian could shoot back any words, Hugo scoffed. "A 'Blade of Grass' can only send you speeding away in short bursts," he pointed out, unimpressed. "Even if you take it from us, you

won't get far."

Cassandra didn't react, her expression a loud and clear statement of: *Don't care, didn't ask*.

Varian glanced at Hugo. His roommate, although not looking happy about the situation, made no protest. Stiffly, Varian handed the bag over to Cass. She took it but didn't move away, trusting the weapon she held to deter any sudden moves. *Is she waiting for something?*

The small but very distinct sound of what could only be described as a mini crackling echoed from the opposite side of the now crumbling ice dome. *Is that Yong?*

Without warning, Cassandra threw the bag in the direction of the sound. Varian and Hugo bolted the same way, around the ice dome, which conveniently (finally) disappeared as Rapunzel and Eugene had the same idea. Then, out of thin air, a new player joined the fray. The bag landed in Nuru's arms. As soon as she appeared, she was gone again. No one even had time to blink. A powerful gust of wind nearly shoved them all to the ground. This time, Varian almost thought that the wind faintly sounded like a dying sparkler, but he may have been mistaken.

The wind was gone, the sparkler sound was gone, Nuru was gone. Cassandra was gone too.

The flute was gone.

Everyone stood catching their breath, reformulating a plan of action. Rapunzel, still holding Eugene's hand, was the first to start running. This might have been difficult with bare feet but she didn't seem to mind. The water that now formed her hair moved to lift her above loose roots and push aside stray branches from the trees.

Hanging back, Varian tried to exercise some restraint, resisting the urge to do as Rapunzel had done and run back to the school, guessing that Cassandra and Nuru (who were most definitely in some alliance) may have gone next.

"Any guess at what kind of magic thing could give Nuru the power of fucking invisibility?" Hugo asked.

"I thought you were the one with all the hyper-specific knowledge of magical objects?"

"Yeah, ones that exist! None of them can do fucking invisibility." Hugo said, looking half perplexed and half jealous. Varian was a little envious too. Invisibility was not an easily accessed power. There were probably objects that existed which provided it, but those were kept under strict lock and key by some of the more powerful magicians of the world. Definitely not at a school like Ever After High where future villains ran around. Furthermore, to try making yourself invisible with a spell was about as difficult as teleporting to the entire country. Translation: Really fucking hard.

As Varian pondered the fuckery he had just witnessed, it occurred to him that a few friends were still unaccounted for. He texted Lance, then Yong, a heads up that the flute was on its way out of the forest. Sad face image. Send. Even if they weren't in an alliance, it was considered good sportsmanship to not let your competitors wander around the woods the whole game.

Hugo huffed, lodging away his questions (while Varian was struggling not to be consumed by his own). He perused into one of his belt pockets, taking out a portable wrench.

“Broken already?” Varian asked.

Hugo let out a crisp, humorless laugh. “You’re hilarious,” he said, turning one of the more rigid rings around the glove’s fingers. “Don’t want this thing catching on fire. The smoke coming from this after I used the dragon flakes should not have happened. Bad sign, structurally.”

Okay then. Varian slowly processed that that move Hugo did earlier, blowing out the smoke, was not done for flair. It wasn’t intended to be cool. Just a malfunction. Varian processed this for longer than he should have, only being pulled from his thoughts when his roommate inquired about their next plan of action. Varian wasn’t too stressed.

“Cass may have the bag, but we’ve got the compass,” he patted his pocket, absentmindedly, “so we should have no trouble tracking down the flute, wherever Nuru and her improbable invisibility managed to—”

Varian didn’t feel the compass in his pocket. Varian patted his pocket again. Not there. Then the other pocket. Not there either. Then the next, and the next. Nothing. Turning them all inside out to find, surprise surprise, nothing.

Hugo sighed. “You put the compass in the bag?”

“I put the compass in the bag.”

When Yong made it out of the Enchanted Forest, empty handed and a tad disheartened, he decided to take a breather on the grass beside the school. It was a nice courtyard, with an even nicer view of the school with its greenery (although that was beginning to fade with the season), pale stone walls, and towering height. Yong really liked Ever After High.

His old school in Oz had a lot of green to it. Green was kinda their kingdom’s thing. That and yellow. Varian would love it! If he went through with his destiny, that is. He’d signed the book, so for now he was going to have to, Yong supposed. But he was searching for a way out, and he was smart so if anyone could find it, it’d probably be Varian. If he did, and their story didn’t happen, and everyone was okay afterward, Yong decided he would invite him to see Oz anyway. Hugo too! His favorite color was green, so he’d love the Emerald City. The Emerald City would love him too, Yong was sure. Nuru as well. She was super smart, maybe the smartest person he knew, as his time being her classmate and more recent conversations had led him to believe. She’d—

Then, Yong heard a sound so familiar to him it could not be mistaken for anything else. Sparking. In the direction the noise came from, sparks coming from an unseen but clearly singular source floated closer, with no evident source of reason. These specks of light died on the ground when they landed, so they didn’t seem to be a fire hazard. Then, the sparks halted in front of him. Out of thin air, a metal flute appeared. *The* flute. It dropped onto the ground.

“Hey teammate,” Nuru’s voice echoed. “You remember the plan?”

Despite the game taking precedence over all else that day, hunger and thirst are facts of life. Thus, lunch came as it normally did.

In years past, and even now, lunch was not a truce. More often than not, lunch would actually be a time of pure chaos, where the best opportunity to get hold of the object being found and kept would be at hand. Everyone would be on edge, especially if they didn't know who had the flute. If such knowledge was available, then the discord would be even more palpable. If not, then whoever didn't come to lunch was immediately suspected of having the flute; and in this game, 'suspected' meant 'confirmed' to have the flute. Consequently, no one expected Nuru, let alone Cassandra, to attend.

But they did. Shocking all who sat at their usual table. More shocking to Varian was when Nuru threw his bag at him.

Varian dug through its cluttered contents. No flute. The rest of his supplies were all there, though, including another object at the bottom of the bag. Varian relished in his relief. The compass was still there. Even if they'd seen it, Nuru and Cass didn't know to look for it, thank goodness. Trying to keep it out of sight (lest the others find out he could track the flute) he glimpsed quickly at its needle.

It wasn't pointed at Nuru or Cassandra.

There was a chance that the needle was malfunctioning (NOT because of the chemical/magical solution Varian had used, of course. Probably. Hopefully) but as he turned the compass this way and that, it kept pointing away from them, away from the entire table. So, either they broke the rules and hid the flute in a third location, or...

They don't have the flute anymore. Varian thought, careful to conceal his delight.

Beside him, peeking at the compass too, Hugo seemingly came to the same conclusion. Only two other players were missing from the table at that moment. Lance and—

A new tray hit the table. Yong, at last, joined the group.

"Where have you been?" Rapunzel asked, clearly finding it strange that the kid who was the most excited for the game would hang back for such a long while. She wasn't wearing the headband at the moment, fully off her guard.

"Ya know," Yong started, half giggling, looking this way and that. "Around."

Hugo didn't like that answer. Neither did Varian. They both discreetly checked the compass again. The needle didn't point to Yong.

Across the table, Eugene groaned, staring at his mirrorphone. "Lance isn't coming to lunch. Says he had to deal with a dorm room emergency. I swear, if we had another leaking ceiling I'll lose my shit."

"That's happened more than once?" Nuru blinked.

"One of the people living above us is a selkie. He's a real prick about his transformations in and out of seal-form."

More chatter followed. Surprisingly, it was pleasant and peaceful. The best Varian could guess, the trek through the Enchanted Forest had left everyone in need of an actual chill lunch, and not a

power grab. In any case, lunch ended soon after that. As soon as they were away from the rest of the group, Varian took out the compass.

“Lance has the flute,” Varian said. The compass didn’t tell him that, but his deductive reasoning did.

“Duh,” Hugo tapped his forehead. “For now.”

Varian brushed him off, agreeing with the sentiment (and not the annoying action). Initially, he would’ve guessed he’d been working with Cass and Nuru, making them a trio. But, with the way Yong was acting, it was possible they were in a quartet. Or in two separate alliances. Lance had won in previous years, so it was not out of the ordinary to think he could’ve swiped the flute from Cass or Nuru between the Enchanted Forest and lunch.

“If Lance is working with someone, then he’s probably going to hand it off soon. I think their plan was to make us think that he’s got it, then by the time anyone gets to him, he’ll be empty handed. It’s a decent plan”

“Yep, ” Hugo smirked. “Too bad it won’t work against us.”

Varian held the compass tighter. “Exactly. I’m just counting ourselves lucky Nuru or Cass didn’t take the compass. They don’t know it’s—”

All of a sudden, Varian stepped into a puddle that looked far too big to be indoors. Hugo stepped in it too. As soon as they did, the water turned to ice, trapping them both. The ice was attached to a longer current of water, stretching around the corner.

Rapunzel! Varian reached for his bag as Hugo loaded his glove with new chemicals. But they were too late. The water lifted the block of ice up, hanging them both upside down. Frazzled by the spin, Varian failed to stop his bag from falling to the ground below.

“I can’t believe that worked,” Rapunzel’s distant voice mumbled before clearing her throat. “What astute observations,” she called out, both giddy and smug. “A switcheroo would definitely be something Lance would partake in.”

“Yeah,” Eugene’s voice joined, more relaxed, “but like you said, V, your tricks make that kind of plan pointless.”

Below the roommates, Rapunzel and Eugene came into view, the princess’ hair still made of H₂O, concentrating, holding them in place, while Eugene scooped up Varian’s bag.

“Thanks for the compass.”

Hugo aimed his palm at the brunet. The water bolted to surround his glove, not quite touching it yet.

“Be nice,” Rapunzel told him. “I’d rather not ruin what I’m assuming is not a water proof, or ice proof, creation of yours.”

Hugo glared at her, then at the water, then at his own glove. He did not use it.

With that, Rapunzel and Eugene took off. As she ran, the occasional droplet of water fell to the floor, leaving a breadcrumb trail. Once gone, the ice even began to drip, but not fast enough. Hugo

was already on it, glove still loaded with the last of their dragon flakes, lasering the ice. It began to melt, making their next problem not breaking their necks once it did. Without his bag of supplies, Varian used magic to conjure the nearby tree trunks that formed so much of the school building's structure to grow new branches, thick with leaves.

Then they were dropped quite unceremoniously on their asses. The flora helped, but it still hurt. Groaning, Varian clambered to his feet, ignoring the few nearby students who'd witnessed the commotion and wanted to help. He looked around, narrowing down where the slim drops of water led.

"You alright?" Varian scrambled to his roommate, already standing, adjusting his glasses, his eyes on his glove.

"Glove's all good, I think. I didn't land on it—"

"But are you alright?"

Hugo seemed startled by the question. "Uh huh, yeah."

"Then move your ass," Varian pulled him along, booking it after Rapunzel and Eugene. He didn't need to, really, as Hugo matched his pace without complaints.

Okay, with *some* complaints. "I can't even *feel* my ass, right now, Farm Boy!"

"Oh, sorry, Your Highness," Varian barked back, sarcastic and panicked. Were they going the right way? Did they already lose the path? "Next time I'll conjure some pillows and a feather bed to catch you!"

"That would be lovely, Goggles!" Hugo yelled back, sounding anything but lovely in his frantic fury.

Running practically blind, only following damp spots on the rugs and stone, it almost seemed in vain. Then, they turned an umpteenth corner and spotted the couple. When the couple saw them, they ran. As the roommates chased them, Varian racked his brain for a spell or alchemical solution to use. Adrenaline wasn't helping his brain think clearly. As he weighed his options, Hugo threw a misshapen glass ball, full of some bright glowing substance, at Rapunzel and Eugene.

He threw it with his metal glove. It landed in a doorway Rapunzel and Eugene were just about to step through. They narrowly avoided stepping in the substance, veering sharply into a different hallway to the left.

Varian blinked. He hadn't even noticed Hugo take anything from his tool belt or his pocket. He just had it in his hand, all of a sudden, as if from thin air. He couldn't have used a spell.

"You missed," Varian said.

"Did I?" Hugo laughed, suddenly breaking off and running down an adjacent hallway, away from the couple. He motioned for Varian to go on without him.

Varian trusted him. At least one of them had a plan. He needed to think. He needed a plan. His biggest obstacles to getting the compass back were Eugene's ghostly trick with the watch, and Rapunzel's headband.

A 'Band of Water' was an interesting item. A pretty one with winding metal vines of nickel lined with aquamarines and sapphires; every bit of it, even these aesthetic features, were part of its power. The gems were infused with magic, while the metals, also infused with magic, kept the water attached to the headband (and thus the wearer's head).

Despite having some moderate knowledge about it, Varian knew next to nothing on how best to combat the item's power. All the water it controlled moved like one big river, staying together. Unless the water was frozen, it would mostly remain attached. But then again, individual drops were falling as she ran. They didn't act magical anymore, not at all under her control once they left the main body of water. If the water particles were far enough apart, they could become useless. There was an idea. But how would he do that?

While regular fire and heating spells wouldn't work on the ice the item created, there was a chance it would work on the water as it was. A heating spell, paired with an alchemical solution for good measure, could turn the water to steam.

It was worth a shot. He just needed the opportunity...

Suddenly, the wall in front of all three of them opened. The wall. An area that seemed to be stone and set in place by years of maintenance swung open like a door. No, not *like* a door. It *was* a door!

Out of the doorway burst Hugo, mechanical glove pointed at the pair. "Hey."

Rapunzel and Eugene both stopped in their tracks. As did Varian.

"How did you—" Varian tried catching his breath.

"Have faith, Goggles," Hugo nodded to the wall. "You wouldn't believe how many secret passages and tunnels this school has."

Then, a few things happened at once.

Despite what Varian expected, Eugene didn't move to hold his watch (Varian hoped that there might be a physical action required to do so. A button or something. If he could do it telepathically, like with Rapunzel headband, things could get difficult). He didn't even run. Instead, Rapunzel maneuvered like she was about to throw all that water she commanded in the same direction: at Hugo. Hugo's the one who broke the ice she created; he was the one standing in their way; so he was the immediate threat. She was first giving Eugene an escape route, then likely would turn and take Varian out of the equation too.

He needed to get the water to break apart. Steam. He needed to turn it to steam!

A plan formed all at once in his mind. Take out one of his pre-prepared solutions, a molten substance (which would've been useless on the ice earlier, but might work on the water), thrown in a fire summoning spell, and use it. The combinations would act as two negatives forming a positive. The plasma of fire and the solid of molten lava, in sudden collision with magic, would become hot air. Hopefully hot enough to make steam.

Varian had two seconds, at most three, to do it. He did it in one and a half. Right before the rapid water hit his roommate, he threw his solution at the wall, literally, spitting out the spell as it left his hand. It exploded out dissolving into pure hot air, hitting everyone in the vicinity, including Rapunzel.

In an instant, all the water at her control turned to steam, spreading throughout the hallway in one big blast. It was warm, almost bordering on humid.

It occurred to Varian then that if he'd made the spell just a tad too intense, the steam could've seriously burned them all. But hey, that didn't happen! Yay! He then tried to run towards the three of them. It was now or never to get back the compass, while Rapunzel's power was (hopefully) unusable.

But he couldn't move. He couldn't move. Why couldn't he move? *Why can't I move?* Rapunzel wasn't moving either. Nor was Eugene, or Hugo. The steam, still connected to Rapunzel's head in a thin layer of liquid, forming the outline of a messy bob haircut, had the density of wet cement.

Bit by bit, that density seemed to loosen enough to allow small movement, but even that looked more like slow motion.

"Hon," Eugene started. "Do you know if this is normal for your new accessory?"

"I don't know," Rapunzel said, sounding just as perplexed as the rest of them. "It's not responding. I think I have to grow more water again. I think."

"You think? How do you not know how your fucking headband works?" Hugo asked, annoyed.

Rapunzel frowned. "I'm not a magic user! I didn't even plan to use this thing. It just dropped into my lap a few days ago."

"So you don't even know how you got it, and decide to use it anyway?!" Hugo was seething.

"Excuse you." Eugene said. "It's not unreasonable. I did the same thing! This watch showed up at my door with a nice little note. Who am I to look a gift horse in the mouth?"

Hugo groaned. "Who are you? I'd say the words 'incompetent', 'rude', 'moronic'—"

"Hey! We wouldn't be in this mess if Varian hadn't turned all that water to concrete steam!" Eugene pointed out. "No offense, V."

"None taken," Varian said, although he wasn't really paying attention to the conversation at the moment. His thoughts were mostly elsewhere.

Think. Think. Varian struggled even to do that in his panic. He needed to calm down. *That spell/chemical reaction, it must be sending the magic water into a freak out. It's still got some power over this steam, and Rapunzel doesn't know how to control it for now. There's a chance that she can get it under control, but if that happens she might just keep Hugo and I stuck while she and Eugene run off again. This isn't like the ice. Dragon flakes, if we even have any left, will be useless. Think. Think.*

This area didn't have any tree trucks, and there weren't any other students. It was just him, his roommate, and his friends. One of whom was less blonde than normal. Rapunzel's bob-like water hair was growing, bit by bit. There was no telling when she'd get control back, but knowing her determination it could be very very soon.

The best solution, Varian decided, the one that gives Hugo and I a fighting chance, is to get that 'Band of Water' off her head.

Varian once again searched his brain for everything he knew about the headband. Its strengths, weaknesses, limitations, appearance, aquamarines, sapphires. It had metal, looked like nickel, iron, probably steel. Hugo would know more about the metals than Varian did, if his glove was any indication...

Wait. That could work.

“Hugo,” he called out. “What is that glove you’re wearing made of?”

His roommate raised an eyebrow. “A mix of metals. Steel, mostly. Some iron. Few other things; why do you ask?”

Varian didn’t want to outright say his plan. The element of surprise would help them get back the compass, if they timed it right.

Varian wanted to make Hugo’s glove magnetic. Magnetic enough to pull a metal-laced headband away from a princess’ head. He knew the spell. He could do it. He stared at his roommate, then at Rapunzel with her headband and watery hair, her back still turned to Varian. Then he looked at Hugo. *Please understand the plan*, he pleaded silently.

Hugo looked at him for a long while. Then he looked down at his glove. Varian watched Hugo begin turning the palm of his glove up and open as if to catch something. As he did, he talked.

“So, Eugene,” Hugo started, sounding effortlessly casual and defeated. “How did you end up allied with O’Hair today?”

Eugene looked incredulous. “Is this some kind of trick question?”

“Not at all,” Hugo said, feigning innocence. “I’m just curious why she wants to be around you all day.”

“Oh, I can answer that,” Rapunzel said. “I’m his girlfriend.”

“I know that,” Hugo dismissed the question. “But that doesn’t answer my question of *why*? You’ve both got roommates with more applicable skills to this sort of game. Cassandra is terrifying and Lance was just as good a thief as you were back in reform school, *Flynn*.”

Eugene scowled, looking anywhere but at Hugo.

“Not to sound redundant, but I can answer that one too,” Rapunzel turned her head (slightly) toward Eugene. “Love makes people work better together. Even if we tried to be on different teams, we’d probably end up helping each other anyway.”

With the couple too busy staring at each other, Hugo sped up his efforts of moving his hand into position. If he had the ability to clap currently, Varian would have applauded the success of his strategy in getting Rapunzel and Eugene to look at each other rather than Hugo himself.

Varian began casting the spell on the metal glove, whispering under his breath.

“I gotta say,” Rapunzel suddenly said. Varian hoped her eyes weren’t on Hugo. “Hugo,” *fuck*. “I’m surprised you didn’t already guess that was the reason. I thought you and Varian had a similar—”

The headband flew off of Rapunzel's head, right into Hugo's metal glove. The steam evaporated. Rapunzel's real hair returned, entirely tangled. Hugo flung himself at Eugene, taking hold of the watch with his metal glove.

At the same time, Varian dug through his bag and threw a full vial of crystallization serum at Rapunzel's feet before she could collect herself.

Eugene tried to pull his wrist away from Hugo's grasp, but the watch would not be unstuck from the metal, as thoroughly attached as the headband. For added measure, Hugo was holding Eugene's free hand away with his other hand, which the brunet was harshly trying to get free. If he could've used the watch's trick by now, he would have. Evidentially, it did require some kind of button to be pushed! Varian reached the pair, linking his arm with Eugene's not-stuck one, keeping it squarely away from the watch. Hugo relaxed somewhat.

"I'd suggest you remove your hand," Hugo started, pointing to the leather strap of the watch, loose enough that he could probably just pull his hand from the watch without even untying it. He really did hate wearing watches.

"Why? Eugene snapped. "You worried I'll—"

"I'm about to freeze the shit out of your watch." Hugo said simply, adding another vial into the top tubes.

"Right," Eugene said, unconvinced. "You're totally—"

Even from where he stood, Varian could tell that the glove was becoming cold. Very cold. Eugene yanked his wrist out from the leather, muttering something explicit that Varian chose not to acknowledge. Instead, his energy went to dumping more crystal serum solution at his friend's feet.

"Sorry about this," Varian said. "Can't have you follow us again." He checked the compass again.

As he apologized, Eugene tossed the stolen bag back to Varian. The compass was still inside, still in one piece, and still working.

"All's fair in love and war." Eugene waved him off, suddenly more amicable to the situation.

Hugo was visibly surprised by the attitude change. "What happened to all that fury? It was just here a moment ago?"

This made the other three students laugh to varying degrees.

"It's a game," Eugene said. "No harm no foul at the end of the day. Acting all serious about it is half the fun."

Hugo looked to Varian, who shrugged in agreement with his friend.

"Surprising maturity coming from you, old pal," Hugo admitted, "considering *I'm* here."

Eugene sputtered. "Varian's the one who chooses to actively hang out with you. If he can like you enough to do that, I can tolerate you," he said, not sounding as convincing as Varian would've liked. Seemingly unable to end it there, Eugene spoke again, "For short periods of time."

Hugo's expression wore the phrase *That makes more sense* plain as day .

Deciding to end this before it got any tenser, Varian guided his roommate away. He wished his friends luck getting out of the crystals. If they didn't, he promised to come back and get them after the game was over. To his credit, Eugene did not retort with anything overly competitive. Rapunzel, however, was all too eager to do so.

"We're going to destroy you!" She screeched. Varian believed it. Sometimes it was easy to forget how intensely Rapunzel cared.

Once Varian and Hugo were out of earshot of the couple, the shorter of the two squawked.

"Ha! That was fantastic!" He was positively buzzing. Not very often these days did he have the chance to let loose with his interests, alchemy, magic, and science. The game provided just the remedy he needed to the monotony of his usual routine.

"Well aren't you pleased with yourself," Hugo teased, a fond smile on his face from witnessing his roommate's elation.

"With *both* of us," Varian said, giddy to share the victory. "And don't act all high and mighty. You're just as happy; I know it."

He eagerly offered a high five. Hugo returned the gesture. At least, he tried to return it. When he raised his palm, getting a little too close to Varian's goggles, his head was pulled into his hand. His glove was still under the magnet spell.

"Hey!" On instinct, Varian tried to pull back, but that only resulted in his goggles getting pulled to the side of his face.

"Shit, right," Hugo said, although his concerned tone was still full of amusement. It was a silly sight, since the headband and watch were also stuck to the glove. Funnily enough, Varian ended up having to repeat the deactivation spell a few times, the words coming out all jumbled.

Once he did finally get over it, he didn't let go of the glove right away. Nor did Hugo attempt to pull back. Varian didn't know what to think of this. For some reason, he felt bubbly about the lack of action; the casual closeness. The—

"Is it still activating, or..." Hugo asked.

Varian stepped (jumped) back. "Yep. I mean, no. It's not. All good."

He tried to ignore how disappointed he was that Hugo had simply been confused on whether the spell was deactivated; that that was the only reason his hand (albeit covered in metal) had stayed practically holding Varian's face (really holding his goggles, fallen *beside* his face). Varian shifted his goggles back to the top of his head.

Before moving on, they dropped the watery headband and the ghost-turning watch onto the ground, where Hugo finished the job of freezing them beyond recognition, Varian shattering them with the heel of his boot. They were polite enough to clean up the pieces afterwards, throwing them into an empty vial Hugo had previously used in his glove. With that settled, they went on their way.

As they walked, adrenaline finally simmered down, Varian's mind filled with unanswered, piled up questions. So many that he found himself unable to speak for quite a while, half focused on the compass in his hand, half on deciding what to ask first. How was Hugo managing all these chemicals in the glove? How did he accurately dispense them? Where did that glass ball, ready with a solution inside it, come from? Did he make it?

Eventually, the universe decided he needed to get on with it.

"Goggles," Hugo nudged him. "You've been weirdly quiet since we parted ways with Couple of the Year back there. Everything okay?"

"Where did that glass alchemy ball come from?" Varian asked immediately. "Did you bring it with you? I packed a shit ton of them myself—"

"I made it."

"—but I didn't notice you..." Varian was agape. "Right then? As we were running? How?"

Hugo wiggled his metal fingers in his roommate's face. "The glove makes the glass," he said. "When I tap my gloved thumb and middle fingers together, it activates a mechanism that releases sand. It's super heated and then supercooled in rapid succession to form glass. The shape is a little unpleasant looking since my hand acts as its mold, but it's meant to be thrown and shattered, so not a big problem yet."

Varian's slackjaw expression made Hugo laugh. "And you're not worried about the glove melting or shattering from the extreme temperatures?"

"The steel and iron used for the palm are the kind that knights make dragon-fighting armor and weapons out of. It's built to stay together, and to keep my skin safe beneath the metal. Plus, both systems can be used to heat and cool the mixtures I put into the glass balls."

Varian grabbed the glove, still on Hugo's hand, examining it. "But how do you make the mixtures?"

"Well, I can't make anything too complicated. No long hours mixing and measuring. But, I can add all the chemicals, solvents, and solutes I need in these compartments, here," Hugo gestured to the empty tubes along the arm of the glove leading up to his just below his elbow where the glove ended.

"Then I can press these buttons," he flipped his hand, pointing out a ring of buttons on his palm, "to get them to combine in the ways I want, and the dispensing that I want. Liquid, gas, or into the glass containers. The same systems that heat and cool the forming glass can also heat or cool substances being made. The buttons only respond to the glove's metal fingertips; I built their details uniquely for that purpose. That way, they can't be accidentally triggered if I hold an object in my palm. Hopefully, with a few more modifications, I can even add ways to make multiple mixtures at once, to be saved and used in quick succession."

Suddenly, Hugo seemed to realize how much he'd been talking. He froze up. His gaze, fixed on the glove for his entire explanation, finally found their way back to Varian. The moment he locked eyes with him, all that effortless poise seemed to falter. "But hey, it's still just a prototype. Lots of issues to work out, if I'm not too busy to do it."

Varian was impressed. Fuck that, *beyond* impressed. A strong wind could've knocked him on his ass from how dazed he was; he was so very very impressed. And, more acutely, he was happy. He was happy for Hugo. A myriad of compliments, inquiries, and even suggestions filled his mind, crowding his voice box.

Then, a recent memory replaced all of them, and left him with an opportunity.

"You're such a nerd."

Hugo blinked.

"I say it with love," Varian quoted him further. Something told him that spelling out every bit of praise he could think of (and he could think of a lot) might be too much for Hugo to handle. So, for now, he would speak his roommate's language: teasing.

Hugo laughed and stuttered (oh my god he stuttered), the reference to his own words hitting him. "Touché," he winked. "Still less nerdy than bugs."

"If you're debating what's nerdier, you've already lost," Varian said, mockingly serious. Although he still had many questions and comments pertaining to the glove, he decided to save himself from looking like a starstruck fool (since when did Hugo make him feel starstruck?) and ask them for later.

"Okay, well, I can say for certain what *isn't* debatable," Hugo held his head high, flashing the glove in his roommate's face. "You think this is sick, right?"

"Are you kidding me?" Varian's restraint broke like a twig. "This is— I'm not even—" He did not, in fact, save his questions and comments for later.

Eventually, urged by his roommate to center more of his attention on the game and less on conversation, Varian kept his complete focus on the compass in his hand. The needle set the course, changing expectedly as they turned corners. The pair followed it as best they could through winding hallways; up and down stairs; barely avoiding collisions with fellow students along their way. They walked and walked and walked, assured they were headed exactly where they needed to go.

Still, the time it took was getting annoying.

"Whoever has the flute must be on the move. This many twists and turns are getting ridiculous." Varian sighed, stamping down his frustration, examining the compass, suddenly worried he was reading it wrong. He wasn't, but seriously this was getting ridiculous.

Hugo hummed, distracted by something ahead. "Look on the bright side, Goggles: we can rule out those three having the flute."

Varian gave him a puzzled look before following his line of sight. Straight ahead, at the end of the hallway, was a dorm Cassandra. She was sitting on the floor in the open doorway, her sword in hand and leaning this way and that as she balanced its sharp blade's end on the ground. Inside the dorm, chilling out, were Lance and Yong. The needle was pointed squarely and clearly to the left, meaning at the end of this hallway they'd be heading in that direction instead.

Varian froze. He held the compass tighter. Luck had been on his side so far. No one (other than the couple trapped on the other end of the school) knew about this proverbial ace up their sleeve yet. Varian didn't want that ace ruined before it led them all the way to the flute. Then, Hugo took the object from his hand, placing it into his pocket.

"Relax," Hugo said, his voice steady. "We can handle anything thrown our way, remember?"

Varian felt a little lighter.

Without a moment more of reflection, he called out to his friends. Despite the game making them all competitors, Varian was honestly always happy to see them. He did not question why they were all relaxing together. Perhaps they were a team, as he'd suspected. That should have given him pause. Regardless, more likely in his mind given their at-ease states was that they were simply taking a break from the game. Relaxing, as friends often do.

"Varian!" Yong was the first to run out of the dorm, hugging Varian, who patted his head. He ushering him back. "Would you rather be able to fly, or breathe underwater?"

"What?" Varian asked. At the same time, Hugo answered, "breathe underwater," nonchalantly.

"It's a game," Yong laughed. "I'm trying to get Lance and Cassandra to play it."

"*I am* playing it," Lance countered. "Even if Cass is not." Lance and Cassandra hung back in the doorway.

"You keep asking too many clarifying questions 'bout the options!" The kid complained.

"I need to be well informed before I make a decision."

Varian chuckled, glanced between the trio. "I see you're all taking a break, then."

Lance gave an affirmative from the doorway, unphased by their presence.

In contrast, Cassandra looked surprised to see them, if not a bit peeved about it. "You look like hell," she said, skipping a proper greeting. "Who'd you duke it out with?"

"Rapunzel and Eugene." Varian said. At the same time...

"The Princess and the Pauper," Hugo grinned. Varian glared at him, which only made him grin wider.

Cassandra nodded. "Gotta say, if I knew that spat was gonna happen, I would've put my money on Rapunzel. And Eugene, I guess, he's there too," she added, making Hugo laugh.

"You cannot seriously have expected that," the blond put a hand on his hip. "We're smarter enough to handle those two."

"Sure you are," Cassandra said, clearing meaning *I don't believe that in the slightest*.

"Guess we're just that good at this," Varian said, tooting his own horn.

"What he means is *I'm* good at this," Hugo said, arm resting on top of Varian's head, knocking one side of his goggles onto his face, "roughly 95% of our skill as a team is me."

“I’m only 5%?” Varian asked, pushing his goggles back up.

“Nope,” Hugo said. “2%. Our oh-so helpful tech is more useful.”

Cassandra crossed her arms. “Outdone by a glove and a tiny magic compass? Cold.”

Varian glared at both his friends. Moreso his roommate. “Hugo, you’re only saying that because *you* made the glove.”

“So?” Hugo smirked. “You’re the one who made—”

All the color drained from Hugo's face. Varian felt it too; the sudden understanding of his friend's words. Somebody knew something they shouldn't.

Varian turned to the student holding the sword. “What did you just say?”

Cassandra stood silent and still. If she had an explanation (in theory, Rapunzel or Eugene could have had texted her about it, having overheard Varian and Hugo talking about it and trying to get the compass themselves earlier), she made no attempt to clarify. Yong and Lance had already run back into the dorm room, the tension so palpable you could reach out and touch it. The longer the silence grew, the more Varian's thoughts filled it, pounding against his skull. The first and most obvious made itself known not by Varian but by Hugo.

“You know about the compass,” Hugo said. It wasn't a question. Cassandra, and probably Nuru too, knew about the compass, but they gave it back to Varian anyway. If the flute was still in their possession, they wouldn't have done that. Even if it wasn't with Cass, Yong, or Lance, they wouldn't just hand it over.

He could've asked her about that. Yet, out of all the questions he could ask, the one that took shape into spoken word surprised even himself as he said it aloud.

“Why are you here?” He started. “Here, doing nothing, hanging around Yong and Lance when your teammate is somewhere else entirely.”

Cassandra didn't respond.

“If you knew we had a compass pointed to the flute, and you had it in your possession, you wouldn't be sitting around waiting for us to find you. You'd be on the move.” Varian thought aloud. “But that's obvious. You're smarter than that. *Nuru's* smarter than that.”

“Nuru did something to the compass,” Hugo realized out loud.

“I have no safeguards around the tracking magic in the compass. If she wanted to, she could've fucked with it, sent it pointing to a different item,” Varian muttered hurriedly. “Then led us in circles, with the flute safely out of the way under your protection until the game was over. All the while Hugo and I would be none the wiser, believing none of you knew the compass existed.”

“One of you has the flute,” Hugo said, a question despite how he phrased it.

Cass tilted her head a fraction. Bingo.

The compass was wrong and the flute was here.

Not a word was spoken. Cassandra held her sword's hilt firmly. Nobody moved. Then, Yong ducked under her raised arms, running down the hall. "Catch me if you can!"

The remaining students blinked, almost in unison.

"Well," Hugo finished adding new vials of who-knows-what into his glove. "Guess that answers that."

Cassandra flashed away from the doorway, the wind that formed from where she'd just stood hit the roommates sharply with its speed. Varian hung on to his bag, managing to step just out of reach of her blade, only for his mind to bitterly remind him that the compass wasn't even in the bag, Hugo had it, and it was apparently fucking useless anyway. Cassandra reappeared standing in the middle of the hallway, an immovable object in their way. The kid was already out of sight. There was no time to waste. They needed to get past her.

"I really don't want this to get ugly," Varian said to her. "Or bloody."

Cassandra remained stone faced. "That's nice, but that depends on you more than me."

A part of Varian worried that trying to get past her, his friend holding a sharp object, would result in accidental harm. If he stood where he was, no sudden movements, she definitely wouldn't cut him (she was too good with a sword to do that by accident, and he knew she'd never do it on purpose). But Varian did not want to lose this game. So, he ran toward her, crystallization vial in hand, half a dozen spells in mind, ready to be said.

Cass didn't even send the wind at him, letting him get close. He had the chance to act! But his worries made him hesitate when she went at him. He froze for just a little too long. She swung, but didn't cut him. She redirected, the blunt end of her sword made contact with his chest. The impact threw him into the wall, his back hitting it harshly. All the air had left his body. He let out a series of shallow, shaking gasps as he slipped to the ground. He barely even registered Cassandra backing up onto the hallway carpet. He did register feet coming toward him. Hugo; he waved him off.

"Is that kind of treatment on the menu for me too?" Hugo asked Cassandra, though he even wasn't looking at her.

"Didn't intend it to hurt that bad. Sorry. But Varian has all kinds of tricks up his sleeve. *Magic* and all," she shook her head. "From what I've heard, your sleeves are mostly empty in that regard."

Almost imperceptibly, Hugo flinched. "Maybe that's just what I want you to think," he said, relaxed.

Bluffing. Varian thought. He needed to get up, but that was near impossible with how hard it felt to breathe. Bit by bit he was regaining his composure, but it took all his energy. It wasn't his rodeo with getting the wind knocked out of him; he'd live. He just needed a minute. But they might not *have* a minute. They needed to find Yong.

Cassandra tilted her head. "Bluffing is disappointing, coming from you."

"Says the one-trick pony." Hugo bit back. "What else have you got other than the sword? And what are you even planning to do with it other than make a breeze and hit us in the gut? You gonna stab us? Break the rules just to win? That's a lot of effort to make against a duo that's already down a man." As he continued rattling off questions, almost rambling, he carefully raised his shoe. He

stood on one leg, metal gloved hand making contact with his raised shoe. Afterward, he did the same action with the other shoe. A quick stretch, a natural action in the lull of competition. But, from where Varian sat, he could see that when the metal gloved fingers that made contact with the bottoms of both his boots, it coated something shiny on them. Looked like paint. Or glitter. Or—

“Shut it,” Cassandra got into a more practiced stance. “I don’t need to do anything fancy. Just keep you from leaving this hallway.”

Hugo finished his stretch. “Guess that leaves me in a bad spot. After all, my beloved teammate is down for the count...” he glanced at Varian, unfortunately still wheezing and in no shape to be helpful.

Hugo seemed to desperately want to say something. He didn’t, but the assumption felt undeniable. Although Varian couldn’t say for sure, he felt almost certain that the message was two simple words: *Watch this.*

“...and I’ve got no magic,” Hugo clapped both his hands together, dropping the bluff. Then he dropped his hands and took out a knife.

Bad idea. Very bad idea. Sword beats knife every time. If that was his plan, then it was a monumentally stupid one. He wouldn’t even get close to her before the wind knocked him down. But, Hugo didn’t rush toward Cass. Instead, he dropped his whole self down, bringing the knife to the edge of the rug, cutting inward. In one swift stroke he cut halfway across, then toward himself, leaving a square three sides-cut shape. The rug, weathered and old, split like butter. He raised his non-metal fingerless gloved hand, the one in contact with the fabric, and the rug lifted with it. It was stuck to his fabric glove.

As he did this, Cassandra swung her sword, throwing the winds his way. Varian braced himself. Even in his curled up state, the wind threw him about a yard back. It did not do the same to Hugo. Using the rug like a shield, Hugo remained crouched in place.

This perplexed Varian, since even with the rug, his stance was terrible. He should've been knocked over. Yet he stayed in place.

It must be that substance he put on his shoes and hand! He must’ve stuck himself to the rug. Varian thought. *But what’s his plan? Even if the wind can’t blow him away, eventually Cass will just go to him and—*

In his metal glove, Hugo formed a small glass alchemy ball. He formed a second one right after, placing it on the ground next to the first. Right as the wind died down, he threw them one after the other, at Cassandra. He let go of the rug for a moment to reload the glove.

So is he stuck to the rug or not?

The first solution went for her head. Cass knocked it away with her sword, sending a sloppy gust of wind hurling toward Hugo, who hid behind the rug again, hand stuck to it once more. Nothing happened when the first glass shattered, its contents splatting limply. The second solution was a complete miss, not even close to her. The wind she sent to avoid the first one didn’t catch the second in time. It landed behind her, shattering just as the latest gust of wind ended. Instantaneously, smoke-like clouds exploded out of the glass heap, right into all three of their faces, blinding them.

Varian heard a rug being cut, brisker than before, then a scrambling of feet (along with a strange crackling sound). Almost as fast, the wind returned. Bracing helplessly against the wind, Varian saw Cass finishing the swing of her sword, sending the smoke away. Only now Hugo wasn't crouched at the rug; he was holding the rug. He'd cut the square section free, taking it with him like a shield. A very dirty shield with dust and dead bugs on its face. The blunt of the wind hit it, shielding his torso and head, but couldn't hide his legs. Varian winced, sure the wind would now knock him down. But instead, Hugo stayed standing, as if his shoes were glued to the ground.

But he moved just now! Varian's mind raced.

As Cassandra readied another swing, Hugo rushed at her, now for Varian to see. He stepped off the rug as if it were the easiest thing to do. The crackling sound returned. Then, breathless, Hugo let go of the rug shield and, with his now free non-metal fingerless gloved hand, grabbed the sword. His hand met the steel and Varian heard an audible, crackling pop. As if on instinct, she dropped the sword like it was on fire. Hugo let it go just as fast, letting out a small hiss.

"Crap," Cass reached to pick it up.

Hoarse-voiced, Varian mumbled a spell, sending the sword flying down the hall.

Hugo pointed his metal hand at the ground she stood, setting off his own crystallization solution. She couldn't get to the sword. Of course, Cassandra stood tall, glaring at him like she was trying to explode him with her mind. Also of course, Hugo kept his head high.

"One," Hugo took a step back. "Trick," one more step. "Pony."

Varian had to admit, Hugo being smug and victorious in competition with someone other than himself was kinda fun to watch. Although it did leave him with a strange, crawling feeling in his chest at the same time. He ignored that, focusing on standing at last, his breathing finally coming easy again.

Cassandra coughed, getting his attention. "Sorry, that hit took you down hard."

"No blood, no foul, right?" Varian said, generously dismissive. He had more important concerns at that moment. He stormed over to Hugo, pointing in his face. "You!"

"Me!" Hugo echoed his tone. His roommate gestured for an explanation, stuttering endlessly. Cassandra too looked like she wanted to know how he fought back against the wind. He lifted one of his shoes. "It's really not too complicated. Lightning tree leaves—"

"I knew it!" Varian exclaimed. "Mashed up they form a compound that solidifies when intense wind hits it, but loosens without that same wind pressure."

Hugo smirked. "The glove has a compartment that broke them up and condensed them into the right mixture to do exactly that. I put it on my shoes. Yadda yadda," he made a spiral motion with his hand. "Wind doesn't knock me back, but I can still move when the wind is over."

"And that zap you gave my sword?" Cass crossed her arms. "That shit hurts."

Hugo wiggled his fingerless gloved fingers. "Same goop," his fabric glove was indeed covered in that slimy substance. "Just used in a different way. It's extremely prone to static reactions. Harmless fire-fire flies, but far more noticeable to us human beings."

“Like touching a doorknob after walking on a carpet?” She asked.

“Exactly,” Hugo said, at the same time that Varian said, “Yep. Which must be why the goop was as conductive on the rug as it was with the tree bark.”

Hugo pouted at the explanation-hijacking. “Both carpets and lightning trees love electric currents,” he added.

“Goes without saying,” Varian said.

“Still worth clarifying.”

“Only if you wanna show off your own smarts, Glasses.”

“Look who’s talking, Goggles.”

After that, the roommates fell right back into discussing the specifics of his method, the glove, the chemical reaction, and so on and so forth. Cassandra couldn’t care less about the scientific specifics, though. Ultimately, she relented in the fight, knowing when she was beaten. Back on track, Varian motioned to the direction Yong ran in. Hugo jokingly linked his elbow with his roommate’s arm, as they went on their way.

Behind them, Cassandra called out. “No blood, no foul, right?”

“That’s what I said,” Varian yelled back, confused.

“In that case,” Cass grimaced. “I’d tell your friend to get that checked out.”

“Get what—”

His question died as he saw what she was referring to. Behind them was a faint, pin prickle trail of blood, leading all the way to Hugo’s non-metal, fingerless gloved hand.

“Oz!” Varian exclaimed. It was an old manner of speaking Ulla used to have which he’d picked up. These days it didn’t come out unless he was greatly startled or scared.

Hugo hummed down at his hand. “Shit. That’s no good.”

Varian pulled at their linked elbows, panicked and pale.

“Calm down. I know for a fact that it isn’t deep enough to—”

“Still!”

Varian dragged Hugo along further down the hallway, around a corner or two, until he found a suitable place for them to stop. There were remarkably little benches or seats in their vicinity, so they had to make due with a distant window sill.

“Sit. We’re getting that cleaned.”

Once the roommate was sat, Varian went scrounging in his bag for any medical supplies he might have brought. Most days, he only carried some pain meds for the occasional headache or cramp. The day of Finders Keepers, however, was not a normal day. Thus, Varian had prepared accordingly and brought along various first aid items. He had gauze wipes, medical tape, gauze pads, bandage wrap, a half bottle of allergy meds.

“You got gas masks in there too?” Hugo said, full of snark, slipping off his fabric glove to allow a better view of the cut. “Seeing as you’re preparing for the end of the world and everything.”

Varian stuttered furiously. “Says the guy who’s in need of this stuff! I swear sometimes you are the most—”

Hugo silently mimed his roommate’s words with his red hand. Varian ended his own rant there. Fairly easy for Varian to do since his mind was busy spiraling. He felt dizzy. It wasn’t even that much blood, barely a trickle now, but it still made that old phobia of his flair up.

You will not faint, Varian told himself. *You will not faint. You will not faint. You will not.*

“Are you okay?” Hugo asked.

Varian adjusted the goggles on his head, even though he didn’t need to. “Just a little uncomfortable with blood,” he started, taking his roommate’s cut hand and applying the gauze.

“A little?” Hugo questioned pointedly. “You’re looking paler than I am, Goggles.”

Varian huffed. “If you must know, I may or may not have a history of passing out at the sight of blood.” His roommate’s jaw dropped. Varian laughed, trying to underplay the severity of his words. “I think I’m okay right now.”

It wasn’t clear if his roommate believed him or not. Varian was more inclined to believe the ‘not’ option, especially when Hugo’s suddenly-not-covered-in-metal hand (he’d taken it off, setting it next to him. When did that happen?) squeezed his arm, keeping him centered.

“Thanks.” Surprisingly, that did let Varian breathe easier. Only a fraction though, as the blood he was staring at still made him dizzy. He must’ve *looked* dizzy, since Hugo’s hand stayed on his arm. “Saving me twice in one day?” he looked up. “Very noble of you.”

“I doubt this counts as saving,” Hugo said, observing him thoughtfully. “But now that you mention it,” he said, gleefully, “this would technically count as my *third* time saving you today, wouldn’t it?”

Varian swapped out the gauze for the package of bandage rap. “Third? I don’t recall that many.”

“Au contraire,” Hugo said, sing-songily. “First, there was a pow-wow with the walking-haircare ad and her boyfriend.”

“They have names,” Varian rolled his eyes. “And it was *my* spell—”

“And *my* glove that did the real work of being a magnet,” Hugo cleared his throat. “Second, the scrap with Cassandra back there.”

Varian had no argument there. “I suppose—”

“And now,” Hugo paused for a beat, as if for suspense. “I have saved you from falling to your certain demise.”

“Now you’re just being dramatic.”

“Me? Dramatic?” Hugo pretended to tear up. “You wound me. Even after I did the majority of the saving. How cruel.”

Another memory returned to Varian. He lit up. “Wait! You forget. I saved *you* when we were upside down in the ice! You totally would’ve broken your neck without me there to keep us from crashing out on the floor!”

“No!” Hugo cried out, full on drama queening this shit. “I was hoping you’d forget that! Curses!”

Varian laughed. Sue him. In his mirth, he accidentally pulled too hard on the bandages, causing the blond to wince.

“Sorry! Sorry,” Varian kicked himself. As he loosened the bandage, trying to actually wrap it right this time, he continued the initial topic of conversation. “Let’s say my grand total was also three and call it even. Half my save for the mist situation, one save for the ice, and one for right now, as I prevent you from bleeding out. Fair?”

Hugo shrugged. “If it helps you sleep at night.”

“Like you *haven’t* been doing?” Varian teased. He nodded down to the metal glove that’d been set aside. “I saw how many late nights you spent on that thing. Can’t blame you though. The end result is a work of genius.”

Hugo visibly brightened. “You said it, not me,” he stated. “Surprised by my intellectual prowess?”

“Not even a little,” Varian said. “And I bet you aren’t either.”

“That’d be a winning bet,” Hugo scanned the glove, as though admiring its strengths. Or searching for flaws. Or both. “The best part isn’t in the gears. It’s in me. That old familiar feeling like I can do something *right* is back,” he sighed, letting out more than air. An almost imperceptible exhaustion came out with it, before the blond put on a braver face. “Not that it ever really left.”

Varian finished with the bandage, adding a bit of first-aid tape to keep it wrapped together. “Good,” he smiled. “You of all people have no reason to doubt yourself.” He gave his roommate’s hand, clean and tended to, a light squeeze. From how quickly Hugo pulled his hand away, he worried that he may have hurt him by doing that. But Hugo didn’t look to be in pain. Rather, he looked almost bashful.

“Thank you for, uh,” he waved his bandaged hand. He slipped his other hand back into the metal glove before standing. “I could’ve done it myself though.”

“Oh,” Varian said. “Right.” That hadn’t occurred to him. Not because he thought Hugo was incapable. Far from it. He just really wanted to help.

“I just mean for next time,” Hugo added nervously. Why was he nervous? “You shouldn’t put yourself through, you know, potentially passing out and all that.”

Varian pouted. "Next time? I'd prefer you didn't get hurt at all next time." Hugo made a face that said he couldn't promise anything. Varian decided to drop the subject for now. "We should probably find Yong now."

"He went that way," a new voice said. A few yards away, Lance stood holding a steaming disposable cup from the Castleteria.

Varian brightened. "Hey! Where've you been? I thought you were still in the dorm room."

Lance took a long sip of the drink in his hand. "I slipped out during your scuffle with Cassandra. In all honesty, my money was on her winning that one. But alas, my heart is still on Eugene and Rapunzel taking home the gold though."

"And you?" Hugo questioned. "You got no hopes of winning?"

"If I really tried, I'd win. As I have before," Lance chuckled. "But I want to give everyone else a shot this time."

Hugo didn't look convinced. "And how do you know where he is if you just came from the Castleteria?"

"Cause I just passed him," Lance pointed his thumb behind him. "He's hiding over there."

A very not-quiet giggle echoed from behind said corner, followed soon after by Yong's head peeking around. "No fair! I told you not to tell them."

"That was your first mistake," Lance called back. "And you shouldn't make a habit of asking people to keep secrets and lie for you."

"It's for the game!"

"It's only a game," Lance said, unstressed. "Despite how those playing it may act."

"So you two aren't even teamed up?" Varian interrupted, pointing between them.

"I'm teamed up with Nuru and Cassandra," he said, sounding so honest that it was impossible to deny.

Hugo scoffed. Varian could practically hear him thinking: *Obviously.*

"As for me," Lance spoke. "I just stopped by Cass' room to say hi. The kid wanted my advice on winning, so I stuck around. Speaking of which," Lance turned to the youngest student, who bounced in place, excited as ever. "It's your call, kid. Your first Finders Keepers, so you decide, what's your strategy now?"

Yong thought for a moment. "I don't want to fight my friends, so..." Yong frowned. It was then that he finally took out the flute from his sleeve, thinking deeply about it. Then, an idea came to him.

He promptly ran to the window and threw the object out. "Now no one has to fight each other to get it!"

“Oh my fucking god!” Varian yelled, already running down the hall, in search of the nearest staircase. Hugo ran after him.

Back where Yong was, Lance laughed. “Love the enthusiasm, but you didn’t stop the fighting by doing that. You just made it fair game for *everyone* to fight.”

Yong’s smile dropped.

“It’s okay. You just did, everyone a big favor.” Lance took out his phone. “Now, it’s anyone’s game.”

“Thank you so much,” Rapunzel stretched her legs, finally free of the crystals keeping her stuck standing in place for far too long now.

C.A. Cupid, looking like if the color pink was a person, smiled. “It’s no trouble. I was actually just reading about these kinds of crystals.”

Beside her, Blondie Lockes, notorious school journalist (gossip), let out an ‘ahem’. “Why would the next Sorcerer’s Apprentice and the next Dorothy do this?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Eugene said. “It’s just a game.”

Rapunzel nearly retorted that this wasn’t “just” a game. It was *the* game. Then, the buzz of her phone interrupted her. Eugene’s phone buzzed at the same time. Both of them stared at the screens.

From how fast they ran, no one would ever guess how tired they were from all that standing.

Cassandra stepped out from the melting crystals. “You know, I’m getting really sick of all this magic nonsense.”

“Really?” Nuru said, sarcastic. “Can’t imagine why.” Afterward, she walked over to the still-trapped-in-crystals sword. Clearly, Varian and Hugo had gone overboard with encasing it; the whole thing was covered in the stuff. “This may take longer than expected.”

Both their phones buzzed. With Nuru lost in thought, Cassandra was the first to check. She was also the first to start running.

“Where’re we going?” Nuru hurried to catch up.

“The flute’s up for grabs.”

Nuru’s resolve solidified. Finally, she caught up to Cass. Still... “You sure you don’t want me to get the sword out?”

“Next opportunity I get, I’ll find another. One without magic this time.”

Along the way, who did they happen to find but their third teammate. “Hi Nuru! Hi Cass!” Yong yelled, running alongside them. “I threw the flute to keep it away from Varian and Hugo. They’re already on their way to it right now!”

Nuru's eyes widened. "In that case, time for phase two!"

Yong jumped. "Shoot! Okay! Headed there now!" He ran the opposite way.

Outside, the afternoon air gave everything a peaceful vibe. From the watercolor-like sky, to the distant, quiet birds, all around it seemed that the world was calm and collected. Inversely, the sight of Varian and Hugo speeding toward a random spot of grass under one of the school's many many windows was an odd one. Running around like headless chickens. What a sight.

But at last, peace prevailed when Varian finally spotted the damn thing. He held it like he was making sure it was real. It was, obviously, real. The urgency he felt didn't subside. They didn't have a working compass anymore, and Varian wasn't hopeful that he could fix it since he didn't know the exact spell or method that messed it up in the first place. They needed to keep the flute in their possession for the rest of the game. No more mistakes, no more losing.

"We need to get out of here," Varian said. "As long as we stay out of sight of the rest of my friends, we can wait out the rest of the game until it's photo finish time." He paused, staring up at the sky. Probably not much longer, if the position of the sun was any indication. He took out his phone to check the actual time. Yeah, not much longer at all.

"Your lockscreen background is cute," Hugo said, like it was some victory he'd won. It was a picture of Ruddiger and Olivia. They were, in fact, cute. Varian hummed, something witty and sweet on the tip of his tongue. Those words died when he read the top notification on the screen.

A single text from Lance popped up, timed several minutes ago. It was one simple statement:

Flute's lying on the ground. Left side of the school. Fifth window down. Can't miss it. Have fun.

"We need to go—"

Varian's mouth ran dry as he saw, to their left, Rapunzel and Eugene appear in the distance. Thankfully without hair made of water or a watch on their wrists, but still a problem. The pair of roommates, in turn, bolted in the other direction. But just around the corner, far away now but closing the gap far too fast, Nuru ran toward them with Cassandra in tow, holding a new, hopefully not magical, sword. The 'Blade of Grass' was still encased in crystals, hopefully. Then again, Cass was also trapped earlier but now she was very much *not* trapped, so who knows.

Varian reached for his bag, sure that he must have something to keep their competitors at bay. His hand met the air. His bag was gone. His bag simply was not there. When the hell did that happen?!

A whistle echoed from above them. Lance poked his head out of the above window. He dangled Varian's bag over their heads. He must have swiped it when they ran to get flute. He then held up another bag. Hugo's.

Without his alchemy, Varian fell back on magic. He blurted out a spell, directing it at the building's outer stones. The stones suddenly multiplied and formed themselves into a makeshift, messy wall blocking Rapunzel and Eugene from view. It didn't stretch all around, running out of stones. *The other side—!*

Hugo threw his metal palm over the vines on the side of the building. His glove worked overtime, surrounding the winding plants with a verdant gas. Suddenly, the greenery grew out like a barrier, twisting in on itself and growing spikes, curving to meet the stone wall Varian had created. Effectively, they'd walled themselves off.

Without a moment to spare, Varian pulled Hugo to the nearest window, climbing inside and yanking him along in an almost ragdoll fashion. They ran. But soon they heard the far off (but not far enough) sounds of breaking stone and sliced flora. Then their pursuers were in sight, climbing through the window.

So they kept running. They ran through the halls avoiding collisions with other students. Varian needed a way to get their friends off their tail. He tried the first things he could think of, a spell and alchemical substance. First a summoning of branches from the tree trunks around them, then a dumping of the last of his crystallization serum on the ground below it. The presence of Nuru made him worry that anything he threw at the group would be countered. Worries became prophecies as she did, in fact, counter them, waving the branches away with swift expertise. If that wasn't bad enough, the crystals only formed *after* they stepped over the solution. Shit. Shit. Shit.

Hugo threw another smoke bomb he created with the metal glove, trying to grant himself and Varian a clean getaway, but Nuru whisked it away with a flick of her wrist. Varian threw a few more ideas at them; his alchemy solution, but none of them were of much use. His options were limited, most of his supplies were in his bag, now firmly out of reach. Still, nothing slowed the quartet running after them. At least Nuru wasn't trying to slow the two of *them* down too. Varian decided not to question his luck, lest that disappear too.

"You wouldn't happen to have more of that crystal shit in your cargo pants pockets instead, would you?" Hugo asked as they ran.

Varian threw another spell over his shoulder at their pursuers. Countered again. "Nope."

"Figures," Hugo said. "Me neither."

Whether it be the crystal kind or, hell, even the sticky compound they'd used on crazy blue pets, a well timed trapping substance would be the best way to fend off their pursuers. He didn't have the ingredients on him, but he knew the best place to find that would be their room. Once there, he figured, they could barricade the door and make more of what they needed. It would be quite the face off afterwards, but that was the best scenario for them. Varian took the lead, running the same path he took every day back to his room. Hugo seemed to realize the route they were on, glancing knowingly at Varian.

Soon they turned the final corner toward the hallway abutting their room. Said hallway was not empty. Yong was outside their dorm room. His arms were full of small items held in glass. "Oh shoot," he scrambled to hide what he was holding: all the individual ingredients for growing crystals and sticky compounds. Trapping solutions.

"The window!" Far behind them, still too close for comfort, Nuru yelled. "No time! Throw all've it out the window!" Yong ran back into their dorm room, presumably to do just that.

Oh goddamnit.

Nuru expected them to try this. Despite being first timers at the game, her and Yong's alliance with Cassandra was more of a problem than Varian ever thought it might be. That was his mistake.

“We need a new plan.” Hugo yelled.

“I’m open to ideas!”

“Good,” Hugo took his hand, leading the way.

Eventually, he brought them to a staircase that Varian didn’t recognize. It was winding and went on for what seemed like forever, up and up. The further up it went, the more the stones that formed its steps seemed to steepen and worsen in quality, as though they were much older than he wanted to think about. While the school they attended was relatively well maintained, it had always been true that some parts of the building were forgotten and filed away. Myriad of secret passages, countless corners of storage in the library, and staircases that weren’t used often, were just a few examples. That made for some perilous travel when using them.

At last, they reached a trap door on the ceiling. Hugo gave the door a harsher shove than he probably needed to, as though expecting the door to be more secure than it ended up being. Hugo pulled Varian up with him, before throwing the door back down. He used his glove to seal the edges of the trap door with a concrete-looking substance. No sooner had he completed this task did they hear an audible *thud* against it.

This was the top of a tower. The room had no corners, forming a perfect circle. In the center was a pile of furniture, Varian guessed. He had to guess because it was all covered in sheets. Many doors lined the walls, none were exits. There was a single, stone framed window on the opposite end of the room.

“We can’t stay here,” Varian ran to the window. There was a significant drop to the ground below waiting for him should he make his exit there. He may not have a fear of heights, but Varian wasn’t foolish enough to do something like that. Even if they had the materials to make another green-trampoline-thing (Varian didn’t. Maybe Hugo did, he wasn’t sure), the drop was too high to be safe.

Hugo said nothing. Varian turned to see him looking remarkably calm. Varian must have looked very confused, because that calmness morphed into quiet glee. Finished sealing the trap door, Hugo waltzed toward one of the many doors lining the walls.

“Earlier, you had the same idea I did. That we needed to return to our abode to collect more trapping solutions,” the taller student explained as he began picking the door’s lock with a bobby pin. “That plan was a bust, but it got me thinking. Where else can you find a sticking mixture made specifically for trapping things like humans or animals without being harmed.”

“The classrooms,” Varian shook his head. “But this isn’t a classroom.”

“That’s where you’ll find the ingredients,” Hugo pointed out. “I’m talking about the finished substance. Hot off the presses and ready to go. Can you guess where that might be?”

Wait . Varian thought. *Is he talking about—*

Another sharp *thump* echoed from outside the door. Hugo jolted, almost dropping the bobby pin. “Okay, guessing games are stupid anyway,” he said. “A solution like that, Goggles, is already sitting around, ready to go, collecting dust. Made by our own hands, and not in our room.”

He IS! He’s talking about— “The staff!”

Right on cue, the lock picking let out a resounding *click* . Hugo stood and swung it open, revealing a myriad of student projects. Including: the staff. The one they made together for the pairs project in Professor Rumpelstilskin's class. It looked untouched, the top still formed a circular ring, with three orbs in a row at the top. Inside the ring was another orb, larger than the rest.

Varian gasped in relief and disbelief. "How did you know this would be here?"

Hugo made a sound like he was choking and coughing at the same time. It was quickly replaced with a hum of satisfaction. "Let's just say I keep my ear to the wall about these things."

Another *thump* , this time followed by the jangling of metal, like someone was trying to get at the hinges of the trap door. Through the fog of his returning panic Varian had to remind himself exactly how to use the staff he and his roommate made all that time ago. He just had to pull this hidden lever to release the trapping compound. He tried it out, unwilling to let wait and see if it would jam during—

Nothing happened.

This lever. Varian tried again. Nothing. *This lever, right? There isn't a second hidden lever right??*

"Fuck," he unscrewed the larger orb from the staff, checking inside. "Fuck, shit, crap."

The interior of the staff, where the chemicals were stored, was empty. "Fuck. School safety regulations!"

"School what?!" Hugo asked, wide eyed. "Since when does this school give a shit about safety?"

Varian laughed, humorless and drained of his previous joy. "When you've broken a few like I have, you tend to remember them. Only this one I forgot till now: At the digression of professors, any substances deemed dangerous are drained from student projects before being stored away."

"That is such bull—"

Thud.

Slice.

This time, a sharp metal blade stuck through the wood.

"This game is nuts. This school is nuts. Why does everything in my life have to be nuts?" Hugo ran a hand through his loose section of hair. "Alright. Your turn to plan, Goggles. Any ideas?"

"Can't you hold them off with your glove?" Varian grabbed his metal covered hand, waving it in front of him.

"Sure, if you don't mind some of them getting severely injured," he double checked his own pockets and tool belt. "All I've got left is the extreme shit and some shit that just makes pretty mini fireworks."

"Yeah, no," Varian said. His thoughts almost drowned out by the sound of steel cutting through wood. "Okay, okay. Okay. I'm thinking."

And he did think.

He had an idea. But he wouldn't say it. It would solve their situations so elegantly, but he wouldn't say it.

They could enchant the staff to fly. But that meant heights, the one thing Hugo feared. He'd barely been cool with leaving their dorm through the window at the beginning of the game, even when his own concoction was on the ground to catch him safely. So, Varian knew this would be even worse for him. He wasn't going to put him through that. This was just a game. A game he loved, sure, but still just a game. He'd let his friends break into the tower and take the flute. Hugo and him could get it back. Somehow.

"I have an idea."

Varian blinked at his roommate, the blond's voice remarkably monotone. Hugo wasn't even looking at him. The sword continued to stab through the door, trying to break it down. "Goggles, I have an idea."

"You said that already," Varian noted, slowly. "Didn't you say it's my turn to make the plan?"

"I have an idea and I hate it," Hugo finally looked at him. "There's nowhere else to go but up."

"Things can always get worse," Varian said. Splintering noises from the trap door, from the sword carving through it, grew more insistent.

"No," Hugo clarified, pointing up. "We gotta go up. Beyond even the roof of this very very tall tower."

"Up," Varian repeated, processing the meaning behind that word, coupled with the dread on Hugo's face. *Flying. He had the same idea as I did.* Varian grimaced down at the staff. "Are you sure you're okay with that?"

Hugo said nothing, just stared at him through his glasses, searching for something, maybe a reason to say *Nope this is ridiculous and a terrible plan I never should've said it*. But, despite the terror that sat in his expression, there was also stalwart determination. A need that Varian himself had felt many times before: to see something that mattered through to the end.

Then, a crashing of splintering wood echoed from the other side of the room and Hugo ushered them both closer to the window they'd be escaping from. "Just do the spell."

Varian did exactly that. Once the staff was floating, he hopped on, Hugo following after. Cassandra had just barely climbed through the chasm she'd carved through the door when Varian pulled his goggles over his face, and flew the staff out the window.

Once outside, he dared a glance back. The others in the window, staring as they flew away. Varian laughed. He laughed very loudly. He must've sounded like a cackling villain, but he was having far too much fun to care. Behind him, Hugo barked out a laugh too, the adrenaline in his system probably just as intense as roommate's own. Although, truthfully, Varian didn't have the brainpower to think about that as he became far more distracted by how tightly Hugo's arm hugged his middle.

"Goggles," Hugo addressed him, quieter now, less snarky, more genuine. Despite the cool late afternoon air, Varian felt very warm. "Not to imply I don't trust your flying, but could you park this thing somewhere away from this hundred meter drop?"

Varian blinked. “Shit. Right. Can do!”

From the storage tower, Nuru watched the pair of roommates fly away. The others were busy discussing amongst themselves how best to handle the situation.

“Can anyone here fly?” The answers were ostensibly: nope.

Nuru knew the spell Varian used. She could do it herself if she wanted, in more ways than one. But that wasn’t the wisest course of action just yet. Even if she managed to get the flute from them right now, it would only make *her* the new target of the other players for the rest of the game. Her plan was not to make herself a target. Her plan was to win. That was her team’s plan too. Time for phase three.

“Well, I don’t know about all of you,” Cass dusted off her non-magical sword, which she’d picked up on her way to the flute earlier. “But I’m headed where the camera is. The game’s timer won’t last much longer. Those two have gotta get back there eventually.”

“*Our* best bet,” Rapunzel chimed in. “Great idea, Cass.”

“I didn’t say any of you had to do the same.”

Eugene punched her arm, lightly. “The more the merrier, right?” Cassandra punched his arm back, not as lightly.

The rest of them headed for the trap door, still technically shut but carved open enough to get through. Nuru stayed by the window, prompting the youngest of the group to loudly ask if she was joining them.

“You go ahead. I’m gonna keep an eye out, see if they come back here first.”

No one called bullshit. Probably thinking, *One less person to worry about*. Good. Once they left, Nuru sat herself on the window sill, overlooking the land around the school, and the sky above.

It’ll be sunset soon. So she sat. Waiting.

Parked over one of the school’s many towers, floating not far above its roof, Varian and Hugo sat parallel on the staff, as though it were a couch. A very high altitude couch. After gluing the flute to the staff with a concrete-like substance metal glove, Hugo had insisted they stay in the air, just in case they needed a quick getaway.

Unsurprisingly, Varian had never seen the surrounding view from so high up. From there, the castle-like structure of the school better resembled a dragon with open jaws. It was daunting, but the afternoon sun, very close to sunset now, gave the stone walls a dreamy color, half in shadow and half in light, easing the sight into something lovely. At one side, the Enchanted Forest seemed to expand forever, into the horizon. Most of its trees were red, orange, yellow by now, with some of them missing many leaves. On the other hand, the town of Book End appeared more like a model for toys, with tiny dots of people. The street lights would be coming on soon.

Despite the incredible view, his roommate didn't seem sufficiently distracted; his discomfort was obvious. Varian elected to help him with words.

"So, aside from our current location, I'm hoping that you *are* finding this game fun."

"It's mildly entertaining," Hugo said. His voice was hollow, unfocused.

"Mildly entertaining?" Varian murmured. "You know, that's a real shame."

Hugo blinked at him, questioningly.

"It's just that the oh-so descriptive Hugo Cast is usually much more thorough with his verbal takedowns," Varian said, feigning utter disappointment.

Hugo's lip curled slightly upwards. "Maybe I'm just being gracious right now."

Varian nodded silently, for once, doing his best to look convinced while not being convinced at all.

"Maybe this game doesn't need a 'verbal takedown' as you called it," Hugo's tone relaxed more.

"So..." Varian waited for the verdict.

"So far," Hugo sighed, "It's fun." Varian did not over-react to this information. He under-reacted. If underreacting involved pumping his fist in the air like he'd won a marathon, then so what? "At minimum, it's given me a good break from my troubles," the blond added.

"Troubles that you've just *invented* a way out of," Varian nodded to his glove, assuming he was referring to his troubles with magic. He was practically foaming at the mouth hoping to see his blueprints after the game was done. "Look. Regardless of your singular, scientific motive for joining, I'm glad you participated."

A comfortable silence made its home between them. It really was a breathtaking view. Even the air felt good. Fall had entirely set in, with winter coming soon, so the breeze was crisp; thankfully this was offset but the direct sunlight the duo was soaking in. What made it all even sweeter was that Varian's spell made the staff fly. He was proud of himself. He'd spent so long without external validation for his use of magic that he knew he had to be there for himself in that regard. He could live off that alone, if need be. But he didn't have to. He had his magic classes. He had his friends. He had—

"For the record," Hugo broke the silence. "Testing the glove wasn't my *only* reason for joining."

"Sure," Varian said sarcastically.

"I'm serious."

"You're never serious."

"Lies and slander."

"You're such a baby."

"Don't use pet names when we argue, honey."

Varian lost the battle of comebacks after that, unable to formulate anything witty (or anything coherent in his thoughts which wasn't something he needed to think critically about).

Hugo could've taken the win in silence. Instead, he coughed. "I mean it. Sure, the game was a good opportunity to test it, but at the same time it's actually, no it's *always*, really fun to be around you when..." he paused. "When you succeed. With magic, alchemy, all that stuff. You glow. It's really something."

Varian glowed right then and there. He must've, for he suddenly felt unreasonably, astonishingly warm. Hugo himself suddenly looked significantly less collected, eyes wide and shifting elsewhere.

"And when I don't succeed?" Varian asked. "In this game, it can happen more often than not." He understood a thing or two about insecurity. About wanting to be seen as capable. To have someone on your side.

"Still fun," Hugo waved him off, "cause I get to be there to save you. Just like you do for me, for some reason."

Then, he let out the softest chuckle Varian ever heard from him. The kind of softness that he should've been surprised by, but wasn't. Not at all. As the sound of his voice faded into the air, that softness transposed into awareness. Hugo looked conscious of something Varian could not begin to guess at. But he could try.

"Guess you understand *why* I do this to myself now," Varian said, recalling his initial skepticism (to put it kindly) toward the specifics of Finders Keepers. Hugo blinked behind his glasses. Varian collected his thoughts. "You asked a couple days ago. Why do I play this game? I get the question. I doubt anybody who isn't part of it would really see all this nonsense as something valuable or worth all the effort. 'Much ado about nothing', so to speak. All this effort and energy over a random object—"

"Which *I* made," Hugo pointed out, almost offended.

"Right. A random object made by Hugo Cast, my wonderful roommate," Varian laid the sass on thick, sincerity still shining through, then continued. "But that doesn't mean it isn't worthwhile, right?" He didn't wait for an answer. "We decide for ourselves what's important to us, regardless of what others may think. Once we know what it is, we go after it with everything we've got."

Like being a Rebel, Varian thought suddenly. The connection hadn't occurred to him until now, saying it all aloud. "It's terrifying at times, but it matters to me. To all of us. So, it's worth risking the unknown. Eye of the beholder and all that junk."

"Wow," Hugo snorted. "Real eloquent closing argument."

"Oh my g—" Varian groaned. "You are the worst, you know that?"

Then Hugo laughed, and Varian couldn't help but join him.

The silence that followed was as comfortable and cozy as the sunset that lit the air around them. Varian scooted a little closer to his roommate. The staff shook a bit when he did. Not enough to make him think they were going to fall to their deaths, but enough for Varian to remember more consciously that this situation may not be his roommate's favorite.

“How’re you doing, heights-wise?”

Hugo huffed. “Well, I *was* doing good before you mentioned it.”

“Shit, sorry,” Varian searched for something else to talk about. “Seems more reasonable than my fear of blood, at least.”

“I disagree,” Hugo said. “Bleeding means someone is in pain currently. It’s completely reasonable to fear pain. Heights is all theoretical. It’s—”

“Just as reasonable,” Varian cut him off. “Falling would hurt. A lot!” Hugo said nothing. Varian could tell he wasn’t convinced. “But hey, you aren’t almost fainting like I do with my phobia. So, you have me beat there.”

“Right, fainting,” Hugo managed to sound less shaken. “From how calm you managed to stay earlier, I honestly wouldn’t have guessed.” Then his voice dropped to a whisper. “I do plan to remember that, though. Now I know how to get you to shut you up.”

“I will push you off this staff.”

“Please,” Hugo enunciated the word. “You’d fly down to catch me long before I hit the ground.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Cause you like me.”

The statement came out so simple. It wasn’t a victory to be held over his roommate. It was an unblemished truth. Varian had no retort to that. Nor did he wish to find a retort. They were friends.

“Sure I do,” Varian said, just as simply. “And vice versa with you, I’m sure.”

Hugo hummed. “Modest, huh?”

“Glass houses, Glasses,” Varian said. “And I’m not hearing you deny it, Your Highness.”

That got Hugo to smile, smug and self assured, verging on goofy. “And you’re not gonna, Farm Boy. So don’t keep waiting.”

Varian didn’t intend to.

Being liked by Hugo, being his friend, was simultaneously the easiest and most difficult thing in the world. Hugo had an incredible talent of being a total pain in the ass while also being the person Varian looked forward most to being around. Even now. Speaking of now, the dying embers of the sunset were doing wonders to his friend’s complexion. His glasses reflect the rays, making his green eyes glitter. His blond hair was out of whack; Varian was sure he himself looked just as unkempt. That’s what constant running around would do to anyone. For Hugo, it left some loose strands of blond hair here and there, framing his face in a way that shouldn’t have been as nice as it was. Then again, Hugo always looked good, so this was more of the universe rubbing that in Varian’s face.

So yeah, he liked Hugo. That wasn’t news to either of them. They’d been friends, genuine friends, for a while now. Liking a friend, enjoying their company, their voice, their hair, their presence,

came with the territory of friendship. It couldn't be helped! It was a required factor of friendship. He liked Hugo. He really liked him. He really...

Oh.

Oh

Oh no

OH NO

NO NO NO

"Goggles? You okay?" Hugo asked. "You look like you really are gonna faint."

"It's nothing," Varian laughed, entirely too loud and unnerved. "It's just the sunset reflecting on my face."

Hugo raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

After another (agonizing) couple of minutes, the sunset finally ended, leaving the cool quiet of night in its place. "We should head back to the dorm soon." Hugo noted.

Right. Focus. Varian swung a leg over the staff, getting ready to fly. "We'll need to be deliberate with our timing. People will be waiting there for us, ready to make one last desperate grab at the flute. The less time we spend there like sitting ducks, the better chance we—"

All at once, a bright light broke through the newly blanketing night sky. Except, it wasn't coming from the sky, it was coming from below. It came closer. It *flew* closer. Before they could even blink, the ball of light all but crashed into their staff. Finally at close quarters, it enfolded them in light, blinding them. Varian barely even registered what was happening.

"No!" But it was too late. He watched as the unmistakable shape of a hand yanked the flute, melting the concrete instantly, from its glued place on the staff. Then the hand melding back into itself, holding the flute, before the light sped away.

"What the hell is that?!" Varian steered the staff to follow. The bright light fled, fast. *Did someone send a projectile at us?!* "Hugo!"

"Already on it!"

As carefully as he could while swaying this way and that, with his metal glove still wrapped around Varian's middle, Hugo finished loading new chemicals into their places. Then he swapped arms, wrapping his free arm around his roommate to keep from falling off the staff and aiming the glove at the ball of light ahead of them. Whatever it was, it seemed to understand what was happening. It dodged everything Hugo threw its way.

Seriously, what is that thing? Varian wondered, frustrated. A particularly sharp turn pulled him from his thoughts.

"Easy!" Hugo fixed his ajar glasses.

"I'm trying!"

In the few seconds that their argument distracted them, the ball of light had stopped in its tracks. Then, it began spinning in a small, circular orbit. All around it, the wind picked up. He tried to fight against the current but they were already losing balance. He knew if they got any closer they would be at high risk of falling. The light must've known that. It was hoping they would run.

Varian wanted to run. But no matter how Varian tried he couldn't control the flying staff. From the way the wind was moving, it should've been pushing them away. Yet it wasn't. It was pulling them in.

"Goggles!" Hugo yelled.

"I know!" Varian struggled in vain. As did his mind.

He'd always been told Dorothy's don't do well with anything close to tornados. They got caught up in them longer than any person physically should. But that had always felt like more of superstition than a curse; something destiny would hand to him as a one-time deal. It felt unreasonable, but there wasn't much of another explanation to be had; it was awfully similar to a bookmark. As far as Varian knew, he didn't get any curses from the previous Dorothy's using magic or being cursed over and over again and becoming hereditary. But Varian was already suspicious of the actual genetic component of bookmarks. What if...

"Hugo!" Varian called back. "Take the wheel!"

"What?!" Hugo protested. "I can't! My curse!"

"I'm affecting the wind!" Varian argued back. "I'm the next Dorothy. Signed and sealed. Tornadoes and similar formations don't like me. It's like my own curse. My bookmark—"

"It's not!" Hugo groaned, still sounding panicked as they were pulled further and faster toward the bright spinning light. "You don't have a bookmark. You don't deal with magic. My curse isn't a bookmark either. I'm adopted."

"But if it *is* one, then you won't be affected if you drive!" Varian insisted.

"But my *curse* will still make it go haywire. It's a magic object. I can't drive it."

"I'll counter your curse. We'll be fine. Trust me!"

"Oh for the love of—" Hugo reached around his roommate and grabbed the ring of the staff. He attempted to steer it away, clearly expecting the same amount of fight that Varian was dealing with, as he barely had a hand on the metal before he shouted, "See?!"

But the staff broke free of the pull. Easily. With his haphazard control, it moved rapidly away from the spinning light, doing exactly what he guessed this light wanted to happen in the first place. They let the wind whizz them around, sending them hurtling away.

Both roommates had to take the proverbial reins to stop the spinning. After what felt like forever, the staff settled down, floating in place. Hugo snatched his hands away like the metal was on fire. But still, nothing troublesome happened.

"Maybe we're in the clear?" Varian said, optimistic. After all, past performance was not a predictor of future results!

It was then that they found out what Hugo's "curse" did to magic staff he personally used: falling.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire, Varian all but screamed the flight spell again. It didn't work. He yelled it again. No luck. They were falling very fast now, headed straight for one of the school's lower towers. He vaguely heard Hugo loading his glove frantically. Maybe he had a plan. Maybe not.

With the wind rushing past him, Varian recited the spell again, calmly this time, as if soothing a frightened animal. Then he felt it, the staff was alive again. He fought the acceleration, yanking the staff's ring up harshly. At this rate, they had no chance of avoiding the roof, no time. But he had to try; he could slow them down, hopefully enough to avoid splatting into an unrecognizable stain on the tiles.

Suddenly, the tiles weren't visible. Varian's field of vision was entirely covered in bright colors. Right below them, fireworks were letting loose, one after the other in close range and consecutive order. They were coming from above; behind. Hugo! He was releasing the fireworks his glove could produce, setting them off right at their feet. But these were way more powered, and far from 'mini' as he'd decided them earlier. He must have combined them with the 'extreme' chemicals, producing a large enough force to provide air resistance. It worked.

At last landing them at a decently safe landing speed. Mostly safe. Their shoes were singed from the fireworks and their legs had the collective strength of a newborn deer, so they nearly fell over the moment they stopped floating. Not wanting to fall off a roof today, or any day thank you very much, Varian sprung them back into the air.

Once they were safely up and away, in control of their flight once more, Varian glimpsed back at Hugo, still catching his breath. The hand he had around Varian's waist was digging nails into his stomach. He asked if he was okay, but he didn't respond. Varian thought he'd say something with rightful fury; that was a very very dangerous idea. They could've been hurt. Any number of terrible outcomes were possible. Instead, he jumped back into their argument.

"It's not a bookmark."

Varian let out a single breathless laugh. "It's a very specific, destiny-paralleling curse?"

Hugo nodded.

"That sounds like a bookmark."

Hugo stopped nodding.

By the time they felt the distant wind fully dissipate, safely from behind one of the school's towers, the night was dark once more. The only lights around were emitted artificially or from the stars. The bright, spinning orb was gone. Where it went, the roommates didn't know. What they did know was that it had the flute and the game was almost over. They knew where that light would have to go next.

"How much time do we have?" Hugo asked.

"Not enough." The timer must only have a few minutes left on it by now. They needed to get back to their dorm room. Whoever or whatever took the flute would have to be headed there.

Hugo was still holding him tightly. Suddenly time didn't seem that important.

"Are you okay?" Varian asked. "That drop was pretty scary, even for me. I have to imagine it was even worse for you. We can go land somewhere quiet, sit the rest of the game out, if you want." He felt and heard Hugo let out a breath of air. Still, he didn't dare look back again, fearing the expression he'd find on his roommate's face. So he waited. He didn't waste time by doing so. This was more than worth his time.

With a stiffness, Hugo swapped his arms, wrapping the one with the metal glove around Varian's middle now. Then, with his free hand, he loaded five vials into its compartments.

"Pretty mini fireworks it is then," Hugo said, matter of factly. Varian couldn't resist looking back now. When he did, he found his roommate calm and collected, eyes on his glove. "Let's make them count."

Varian paused. "So, you're okay?"

"Do you need me to spell everything out?" Then green eyes met blue ones, and Hugo grinned in that way only Hugo Cast ever did.

Yeah. Varian smiled. *He's okay.*

Varian and Hugo flew to their room, or more accurately the window of their room. As they did, they noticed a very bright light in another window, same floor, a few doors down. Then it was gone.

"Shall we investigate?" Varian consulted his roommate.

Hugo frowned. "We should stay a step ahead of it." So that is what they did.

Varian flew them closer to their open window, hovering close to the wall, out of sight of anyone who may be in there. He took a breath, basically planning to bust in and wreak havoc. Before he could, Hugo squeezed his arm, shaking his head.

"Not yet," Hugo whispered. Varian chose to trust him. The blond flipped open his pocket knife. He angled its reflective surface to give them a view inside. Scanning, he saw that everyone was inside. No, almost everyone.

Suddenly, Nuru ran inside. "They're on their way!"

So much for the element of surprise. There was no time to investigate who might have the flute. They were out of time. Summoning all the speed he could, Varian flew the staff through the window, landing and jumping off. He already had an alchemy ball in hand, along with the start of a spell on the tip of his tongue, for good measure. He could hear the gears of Hugo's glove click and clank. Every sign pointed to a brawl about to begin.

Then, the room lit up. It *literally* lit up. Engulfed in blinding light. Varian shielded his eyes. His lack of sight didn't affect his hearing; shocked gasps, movement, reaches for anything to hold themselves steady with. Loudest of all, he could hear the tick of the camera timer. The ticks went

on three more times, then a loud bell-like sound rang out, just as the all consuming light disappeared.

Everyone blinked and suddenly saw Cassandra, Yong, and Nuru standing in front of the camera, each with a hand on the flute. Flash. Click. The camera printed out a picture. Nobody moved. Nobody breathed.

Then, Rapunzel, of all people, took a satisfied breath of air in and out her nose. She hopped over to the camera, lifting up the printed photo. “Friends, I’d like to introduce this year’s winners: Cassandra, our veteran winner, and Nuru and Yong, our first timers!”

All at once, the animosity and competitive spirit in the room dropped into relief and joviality. The others, the losers, surrounded the winning trio, their loud voices overtaking everything else, leaving the air rosy. Hugo hung back with Varian, evidently processing the whiplash of the sight before him, in his room.

“I can ask them to leave now,” Varian said. “If you want to chill and destress after all that.”

Cogs turned in the blond’s brain. When his focus flickered from the group of friends to Varian himself, the alchemist wanted to melt into a puddle and scream bloody murder at the same time. The suspense was terrible, only made worse by the fresh hell of feelings he now contended with.

Without giving an answer, Hugo waltzed over to their shared coffee/hot chocolate maker.

“Anyone who wants to drink from a mug needs to line up now. We only have two,” Hugo said. Although his back was turned to the rest of the group, from where Varian stood he could see that his roommate was grinning.

That night, everyone crowded around in the middle space between Varian and Hugo’s halves of the room. Using the drink brewer and every spare mug (all two of them), paper cup, and even a sterilized beaker or two, the whole group sat around and changed the air from competition to cheer. All dangerous items were put away, even Hugo’s glove (although he did take a second to show Yong the mini fireworks it could create. He was over the moon). Everyone talked and relaxed, while Rapunzel set about fiddling with the old camera.

“So that light was your doing, Nuru?” Rapunzel asked, trying to decide what or who to take a picture of first. She settled on Eugene and Lance.

Nuru nodded. “Not just my doing. It was literally me! A Little Star specialty,” she said, her tone formal and practiced, beaming brightly.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” Varian sipped his drink.

“And when’s the right time to demonstrate it?!” Nuru laughed. “I’m sure I just woke up half the town and school with that lightshow.”

“Speaking of which,” Eugene nodded toward the door. “How long do you think we’ve got before an administrator comes knocking?”

Hugo groaned. “Yeah, I was wondering if there’d be actual consequences for the chaos you all caused today.”

“The chaos *we* all caused,” Varian shot back.

Among the chatter, with commentary from Yong, and the occasional note from Cassandra, Nuru thoroughly explained the steps of her plan. The improvisations, the preparations, the dropping of secret “gifts” to other players in the game.

“To be honest, I wish it’d been more chaos,” Nuru sighed. “I was kinda banking on you all keeping each other too busy to spend time actually finding the flute.”

“Weren’t you worried that these items,” Hugo started, “very powerful items, would be used on one of *you* eventually.”

“Not if it wasn’t made obvious that we had the flute. Lunch sold our plan pretty well. Yong acting suspicious, Lance being absent, your compass pointing away from us, all of it made the ruse easier to sell. But you!” Nuru pointed across the room to Lance. “You didn’t even use the item we left for you!”

“I don’t mess with magic,” Lance shrugged. He pulled out a pen from his pocket, tossing it to her. She caught it frantically, sighing. Lance hummed. “I’m not that foolhardy.”

“Hey!” literally everyone else in the room exclaimed at once. Even Rapunzel, Cass, and Eugene, who’d used magic items during the game.

Nuru rubbed her face, getting back to her explanation. “Failing the you-all-fight-each-other idea, I had hoped you two would just follow your malfunctioning compass till it was time to end the game.”

Generously, she showed them what the new item the compass followed was, a single earring of hers. She explained that she has a bad habit of losing this particular earring, so this plan actually killed two birds with one stone for her.

“So,” Varian sighed. “You *did* find the compass in my bag. That’s how you knew about it?”

“Oh no, I knew about the compass days earlier,” Nuru said.

Varian nearly spit out his drink. “Come again?”

“You’re not as secretive about your shit as you think you are.” She said, quite ominously. The effect was undercut when Hugo snorted. Varian glared at him. That only made the blond break into fits. “It was partially luck,” Nuru admitted, annoyed by the interruption. “I saw your plans for it written out in one of your notebooks.”

“In class?”

“In your room,” Nuru said. “That was also when I took note of every chemical and ingredient you had stored away. That way, I could tell Yong what to look for during the latter portion of the game. I said *partially* luck. Not total luck.” She raised her mug to toast it. Being gracious teammates and losers, respectively, the others clinked their glasses with hers.

Varian finished the last of his drink. Then came the million dollar question. “Okay, that’s all grand, but how did you turn invisible?”

Silence followed. Nuru thought through her answer, her wording well chosen. “It would be inaccurate to name what I did invisibility.”

“She sparks like a dying firecracker!” Yong chimed in. “I saw!”

“Again, terribly inaccurate phrasing,” Nuru murmured, clearing her throat. “I was using the same ability I used to blind all of you, and to fly to Varian and Hugo while looking like a star. Only difference is that it was daytime. I can’t use Little Star magic during the day. When I try, I don’t glow and fly, I just fizzle out and turn translucent. Cassandra’s sword-made wind covered the sparks long enough for me to get out of everyone’s line of sight in the forest. It’s kind of a side effect of my magic,” she groaned. “And *only* mine. The rest of my family can do the same things I can, but only I got the shit side effects.”

A potential bookmark? Varian thought, listening intently. There was still so much to learn about how these “curses” worked. Were they different from bookmarks? If not, then were they truly genetic? Or was it something else? Hugo coughed, catching Varian’s attention. The blond gave him a quick look, suggesting that her words reminded him of bookmarks as well. Thankfully, he didn’t seem too phased by it. In fact, he looked relaxed, sitting on the floor with them all, one arm on his chair, face in his uninjured hand. That’s when Ruddiger climbed onto Varian’s lap, dismissing his thoughts on the matter as well.

“To be honest, I thought it would come much easier now that Legacy Day has passed,” Nuru said. “They even said it would start working the day after I signed. But, even now that I signed, it’s still very frustrating.”

“Well, you make it look easy,” Hugo chimed in.

“It *is* easy, even though it’s kinda difficult sometimes. Cause I love it,” Nuru’s gaze glided to the window, to the night sky. “I cannot wait to be the next Little Star.”

Hugo lifted his beaker to her, his expression full of pure solidarity. As they clinked glasses together, Varian felt utterly glad for them. Somebody ought to be happy about destiny, if it had to exist at all. If there was a way, Varian hoped to avoid out of his own destiny, while staying out of their way of theirs. There had to be a way to do both, to depower the Storybook for those who wanted out, and not for those who wanted in. There had to be.

“You’ve won the greatest prize of all today, Star Girl,” Hugo said, self-assured, pulling Varian back to reality. Nuru glanced back, unimpressed already. “My utmost respect,” he said.

Nuru's expression remained unchanged. “Cool. Thanks.”

“What about me?” Yong hopped closer, very much impressed.

Hugo tousled his hair (gently shoving the kid away). “You have my admiration. So small and yet so willing to try at a competition you surely didn’t realize the full insanity of going into it.” This, happily, made Yong laugh, so any intended insult was lost on him. From the look on Hugo’s face, he didn’t seem to intend any in the first place.

Cassandra looked their way.

Hugo held his free hand up. “I’m already scared of you,” he said simply. “There’s not many higher pedestals you could be on.”

Sipping at her decaf coffee, Cass didn't say a word, but seemed content.

That was a good word for the mood of the evening: content. Everyone was happy, tired, and at peace. Even Hugo seemed that way, especially as his robotic mouse on his shoulder, trying to find a comfortable position to rest. When she didn't find one, she jumped down and scurried to the raccoon sleeping on Varian's lap. That's when the engineer finally noticed the alchemist smiling at him.

Hugo smiled back. "What?"

Varian didn't have an answer.

The flash of a camera broke their observation of each other. Rapunzel, nearby old camera in hand as it printed out a new photo. Wordlessly, yet looking faintly smugly, she handed it to them. Hugo took the photo first. Varian, feeling a little silly (he'd added marshmallows to his goddamn hot chocolate; it was a silly night) yanked the photo from Hugo's hand.

"Found!" He exclaimed. "And I'm keeping."

Varian was promptly booed by the entire group for the bad joke.

Hugo, who was half booing alongside them, ultimately came to his defense, overdramatically shouting "Let the man be free!" Before everyone went back to their chatter and conversations.

"Well, I ought to have won *something* today, right?" Varian held the photo as if it were some kind of gold metal. In all seriousness, the sights and company around him were already his reward, and he couldn't ask for anything more than that.

"Don't sell yourself short, Goggles. You did win something," Hugo said, smirking. Resisting the urge to roll his eyes again (and ignoring how hyper-aware he was of his roommate's closeness), Varian simply raised an eyebrow. His roommate batted his eyelashes behind his glasses. "You've won my heart," he said, all over-dramatic and sugary words signaling that the statement was anything but serious.

If Hugo had made a statement like this to Varian this morning, he wouldn't have been bothered. This far into living together, the shorter student was used to his roommate's attitude and demeanor.

If made this morning, a statement like this would have been met with an eye roll from Varian, comfortable in their dynamic, knowing full well that outlandish claims like this were just that: outlandish. They were friends, and a little hyperbolic affection was typical of Hugo now and then. Friends.

If made this morning, Varian wouldn't have given it a second thought.

Only now that the world had tilted on its axis, Varian was left to rebuild his ability to respond to these sweet but ultimately, intentionally, exaggerated declarations. They were friends. That's what Varian kept reminding himself with the urgency of a fire alarm. That's what he reminded himself as he tried not to think about those stupid green eyes and glasses and blond hair and sharp mind and unwavering dedication and the softest smile he'd ever seen in sunset lighting on a flying staff and this exact moment sitting next to each other on the floor of their dorm room and simply being—

At last, they all heard the tell-tale sounds (boots stomping closer and closer) of an administrator heading their way. Everyone else braced themselves for the inevitable trouble they were in. Although, honestly, none of them were too broken up about it. Least of all Varian, who had far more pressing concerns.

Varian was in trouble. He was in so much trouble.

Chapter End Notes

Y'all have no idea how long I've wanted to do the Oh. Oh thing. Biting the bars of my cage rn. Chewing them down. I am out of containment. Be very afraid.

Okay, so it feels like everyone and their grandmother has given Hugo a robot arm at this point in the fandom, and I fucking love that. People should do it even more, any way they can. So, I wanted to incorporate that idea (somewhat) into my fic with his new device for using (sorta) magic!

Anyway, next chapter is called True Hearts Day.

Hope y'all enjoyed today's chapter! As always, be sure to take care of yourselves, stay cool if you're somewhere hot, stay warm if you're somewhere cool, and DRINK SOME WATER!!!!

True Hearts Day Part 1

Chapter Summary

In the wake of a forgotten holiday, Varian is forced to confront and evade a fresh wound.

Chapter Notes

HELLO READERS HELLO READERS HELLO READERS

I've always been really fascinated by True Hearts Day as a concept in EAH. Especially the line where Apple White says, "It used to be such an important holiday on the royal calendar." Dear read, you know damn well I thought about the implications of that line for a VERY long time. Cut to today, throw in a dash (gallon) of Varigo and here we have our lovely new content!

Hope you enjoy the new chapter!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

"Though it can't do magic in the traditional sense, as I've infused no spells or enchantments into it, this metal glove is capable of all the same feats that potion making can accomplish, and more. For these reasons, I believe I should be allowed to use it in class." Hugo concluded his spiel with an innocuous grin, hopeful that this show of confidence hid the wild nerves currently drowning him.

Two of his professors, Madam Baba Yaga and Professor Rumpelstilskin, examined the glove with a mix of apprehension and fascination. Madam Yaga's magic currently had it floating in mid air, slowly spinning it while she herself floated around it, expression fixed and critical. In contrast, Rumpelstilskin, on a stool Yaga dragged over, used his magic to open and close various compartments of the glove, scanning all the little details (though Hugo wasn't sure how much he could see with his hat basically covering his eyes).

Hugo stood there, waiting. He'd planned on showing this glove off to the two professors of his most important classes. The magic ones. He only wished he had more time to prepare. Beggars can't be choosers, and his luck wasn't all that good recently.

After Finders Keepers ended with faculty knocking at his dorm room, the interrogations poured out. "What were these reports that you were doing magic outside of class, Gale?" "What were you doing flying through school airspace? I'm talking to you too, Ms. Star, I know little star magic when I see it!" "Who here put a sword through the trapdoor of the storage tower?" and Hugo's personal favorite: "What in the name of all that is good and fair is THAT THING, Cast?"

Then came the detentions. A truly remarkable number of detentions. Twenty four in total, three for all eight participants in the game. That wasn't all! Headmaster Grimm (old prick) was so upset over

the whole situation, that he sent everyone to an immediate, invented-on-the-spot, late night detention. All except Hugo, who'd been dragged to Baba Yaga's office and interrogated about the device he'd built.

"Well," Madam Yaga spun the glove once more, herself finally stationary. "I can't condone your testing locations for such an item. All over the school, so I've heard."

"Nor can it be said that this contraption merits any praise beyond mild amusement," Rumpelstiltskin waved, closing all the glove's compartments and stepping down from the stool.

Hugo braced himself. That thing was as good as scrap metal and he knew it. Even if it wasn't against what little safety regulations this school had, the device still couldn't truly circumvent the problem of his curse— Cold metal met his chest. Hugo scrambled to catch it as the levitation holding in the air dissipated.

"On school property, restrict your use of this item to inside the classroom," Madam Yaga instructed, "or it will be confiscated."

"Thank you," Hugo said, far too quickly for his own pride's liking. Even so, he meant those words with all his heart. That's not to say he considered this glove to be his greatest creation (Olivia held a permanent claim on that title) but second or third (that was a question for later), place was nothing to sneeze at. Yeah.

"I'll say this much," Madam Yaga stared off into space, reminiscing. "I don't recall your mother ever demonstrating this kind of ingenuity when she dealt with the drawbacks of Sorcerer's Apprentice magic. What a strange bookmark your line deals with; and *she* dealt with it her whole time she attended this establishment. You've been lucky enough to avoid it

"Until this year." Rumpelstiltskin rumbled.

Hugo swallowed the lump in his throat. He wanted to correct her. He couldn't. Not without suspicions being raised.

This curse (that was the best word for it, by default) was, *is*, not a bookmark. Sure, it had all the symptoms: every magical spell he performed, magically infused items he personally used turned into a complete disaster. In spite of this, according to not only Donella but also *Ulla* (through her research notes) a bookmark was a result of genetics. A bookmark was an unfortunate side effect of a family using the same magic or having the same curse placed on them over and over again for generations. Thus, it was a widespread problem for those with destinies to fulfill.

Hugo, being adopted, should not have a bookmark. Some people (one person) seemed convinced there was something else going on, but Hugo knew better. Varian had been far too eager to accept what couldn't be true. Stupid (amazing) Varian and his stupid (ridiculously fun) games and encouragements. The brilliant mind of his didn't ever stop turning.

Earlier, when Hugo was first shuffled away to discuss his invention with the professors, Varian had smiled at him, no doubt hoping Hugo would get to keep the glove he'd made. An utter fool, that was who his roommate was. Not that Hugo was complaining.

"Impressed or not, we cannot erase your demerits," Madame Yaga stated. "Make your way to detention. Professor Poppa Bear will likely free you all soon, but you should still make an appearance."

Now *that* Hugo could complain about.

Exiting Baba Yaga's office, Hugo waited for the door to completely close behind him before carefully (frantically) checking every little detail of the glove, desperate to be sure that professor's telepathy hadn't thrown anything out of whack. Thankfully, everything looked fine. Better than fine.

Privately, personally, Hugo could admit how very very proud he was of this bucket of bolts. He was especially pleased with how impressed others seemed to be about it. Not only his professors, but his fellow magic students, Nuru, Yong, and Varian. That knowledge made Hugo's heart sing; a very different feeling from the praise any of his past magical feats earned him.

Tucking the glove under his arm, Hugo made his way out of the staff offices hallway.

Or, at least, he was about to.

A light reflected off his glasses, catching his attention. Far down the hall in the opposite direction of where he needed to go, Donella's door stayed shut. Where mahogany met the floor, shimmering purple and silver lights shown from underneath, crawling at the carpet.

She must be working on the Storybook again, studying it. How close was she to figuring out the problem with it? Would she need more information from Ulla's research soon?

Finally?

The Sorcerer's distance from Hugo, her deathly silence, in the weeks since his magical blunder at her lecture, had been absolute. At first, he figured communication would took place through Cyrus, but he hadn't contacted Hugo in weeks either.

To say it unsettled Hugo would be the understatement of the century. She was only doing what she would with any other disappointing lackey. She was being cautious, reassessing the situation. Hugo understood. As it stood, he was more of a liability than an asset. Despite what his bookmark-like curse would suggest, he was not her successor by blood. Hugo at her mercy. She could replace him, if things got worse. But they weren't worse. It was all the same level of bad.

Donella wasn't cutting him out yet. She *wasn't*. She was busy with the Storybook. When she had a task for him, or needed an update on Ulla's research, she would tell him. Then he'd be rid of this looming dread, and all would be fine again. Well, as fine as they could be.

He was lucky to be her successor at all. If he still was...

DING!

Hugo scrambled to silence his mirrorphone, as if the small notification would be heard through the mahogany. The screen brightened with a new message.

Goggles

Still alive?

This guy. The rush of relief, the lightness in his chest, was hard to ignore. No doubt, his roommate would be thrilled to see the metal glove still in his possession.

Sparing one glimpse at threshold back into Donella's world, Hugo held the metal glove a little tighter on his arms. What would she think of his creation? Hugo couldn't imagine her beaming and complimenting his work. In fact, the idea was foreign to him. Donella was not one to put on a face. All he wanted was her straightforward, unmistakable trust in him and his capabilities.

Next time. Next time she called on him to make a report, he'd show her the glove. Until then, Hugo would keep doing the one thing he'd been asked to do. Being Varian's friend. Assisting him in decoding Ulla's research notes. He'd have something to report on soon. There weren't many pages left. What else would be revealed? What else, other than what he already knew was coming.

How soon would the day of reckoning arrive:

"Either the Storybook is capable of being de-powered, and no one gets a story, or it stays as it is. There is no middle ground. You'll see." Donella warned him, a small kindness in her own way. Hugo knew what was coming, he just didn't know when. Either way, it was inevitable.

Whether I like it or not. Hugo thought, small and desolate.

Late night detention. Quite possibly the stupidest idea to ever be issued by Headmaster Grimm. Which is really saying something, as that man's been responsible for a record number of stupid ideas. Not that Varian and his friends were in a good place to judge.

"He should be out cold," Nuru whispered. Her hands moved through the air, channeling a spell, increasing its intensity with each passing second. "Just keep up your side of the equation."

"We've got this!" Yong said, giving Nuru a thumbs up. Immediately, Varian collapsed. Or he would have!

Ow! Varian jolted back awake, his shoes nearly burning him for a moment. Yong shot him an apologetic shrug, hands back to work on the spell.

The plan was simple: Nuru, the future Little Star, was casting a sleep spell over the room. She's started small, making sure the professor keeping watch over them wouldn't notice. As he fell asleep, she gradually increased the intensity of the spell. Now, at the instructor's desk, Professor Poppa Bear, a literal talking bear, sat snoring away.

For the record, Varian did feel bad about this. The poor guy probably got called in at the last minute to supervise their inexplicably late prison sentence.

Most of the desks were empty. Obviously. Nobody except their motley Finders Keepers crew was given such a detention at this hour in the night. If Headmaster Grimm weren't such a man-child, he could've let them attend these detentions during the school week like any rational administrator would! But, he just had to have the last word. Varian wasn't surprised. He'd be a fool to assume Grimm had a single rational bone in his body.

Anyway, back to the irrational thing Varian and his friends were attempting.

The sleep spell, by its very nature, was not a targeted spell. It filled a room like smoke from a fire. The gang needed a way to stay awake. What was the point of trying to sneak out of detention if they were going to fall asleep there?

Cue Varian and Yong, Magicology students alongside Nuru. Together, they cast a continuous (and slightly too high intensity version of a) hot shoes spell. Normally, such a spell was only used for things like physical therapy, cold weather, etc, etc. However, at a slightly too high intensity, it served a new purpose. Though the result was a little uncomfortable, it kept them all from falling asleep. Yong was in charge of keeping Varian and Eugene awake (Rapunzel had no shoes on. She happily passed out piggybacking off her boyfriend), while Varian kept Yong, Lance, and Cassandra awake. Nuru wasn't affected by the sleep spell, since she was the one casting it.

The temperature needed to stay steady. Through his slight discomfort, Varian remained determined, mind as sharp as a rock. Nothing else invaded his thoughts. Nothing at all. No siree. No unanswered texts or newfound feelings rattling around. None.

Step by step, quiet as mice, the gaggle of students made their way to the door— It swung open.

“What are you—?” Hugo started to ask, way too loudly. Like smoke from a fire, the sleep spell expanded out of the room. It hit Hugo and, thanks to its high intensity by that point, he instantly dropped.

Everything that followed occurred in the span of two or three seconds. Varian dove for his roommate, abandoning the hot shoes spell. As a result, Lance, Cassandra, and Yong all began to drop. With Yong clocking out, Eugene dropped too, with Rapunzel still on his back. Consequently, Varian, helping Hugo stay upright, had no one keeping him awake.

Panicked, Nuru dashed away the sleep spell before any of them could hit the floor.

There was a good chance the commotion would've woken up the professor even if the sleep spell was still going. It wasn't going though, so the professor shot up in his chair. The bear surveyed the chaos before him, the dissipating magic smoke, the students picking themselves up by the exit, and...

“You know what?” Poppa Bear mumbled, standing from his desk. “I'm gonna tell Milton you all did your time. Remember to report to your other detentions during the week. Good night.” Collecting the last of his things, the professor trudged out, heading home.

Varian winced, watching as the others slowly got back up, still a little drowsy and certainly a little dismayed at their luck. He wasn't in a much better state than them. *Would've been a better idea to cast an extra hot shoe spell on Hugo.* That was a disconcerting lack of foresight from Varian. Surely, it wouldn't happen again.

“Goggles?” Hugo asked, still leaning on Varian. “You can let go.”

Oh. *Oh*. Varian was the one leaning (clinging). He jumped back, totally gracefully.

“Do I wanna know?” Hugo asked with both a grimace and a look of sheer glee.

Whatever clever comeback (or, let's be honest, flustered response) Varian had died in his throat. There, tucked under Hugo's arm, nearly hidden by the way he leaned against the doorway, was the metal glove, safe and sound. Varian's concern and terror quickly turned to smug satisfaction.

“Well, how about that,” Varian mused, pointing out the homemade device. “You still have the glove.”

Hugo blinked, then: “All right,” he bristled, rubbing behind his glasses, sounding very much amused under that layer of exhaustion, “get it out of your system.”

“I was right,” Varian said sing-songily, glad for his friend. “I was right.”

Hugo waved his hands like a conductor would, like Varian’s boasting was some great symphony.

Varian devolved into giggles. Eye contact was made.

God, Hugo is so—

No more eye contact! That’s— yep. Not good.

Varian chose, calmly and rationally, to start heading back to the dorms.

Smack dab in the center of Varian’s bed, Ruddiger was sound asleep. Varian envied him. One of these days, the alchemist would try inventing a self-sleeping spell. Goodness knows it would save him and plenty of other people from insomnia. But that was for another time. His mind was still racing, and not merely because of Hugo. During detention, before the escape plan was hatched, Varian had purposefully kept his mind on anything but his roommate. Landing on Ulla’s research, it hadn’t taken long for forced focus to turn genuine ideas.

Now, at his desk, Varian flipped through page after page, each marked as translated, each with an attached sheet of paper detailing their meanings. He stopped on the page they’d left off on, one of the last pages in the notes.

Not much left to do. The thought left Varian with potent nervous anticipation. It wouldn’t be long before he got to see his mother’s final findings.

“Whatcha writing?” Hugo’s voice floated from his side of the room.

“Just some ideas for how to crack the next pages of notes. I didn’t have anything to write them down on in detention,” Varian frowned. “I don’t feel like sleeping. I might give these a shot.”

Glancing back at his roommate, Hugo was already staring at him. For a split second, Varian swore he looked disappointed, scared. Then, it was gone.

“You want help?” he asked as he went to untie his hair.

Hugo has such nice hair—

“Sure!”

If Hugo thought Varian’s cracking tone was odd, he didn’t say so. He sat by him and got to work.

This is fine. This is fine.

It was not, in fact, fine. The work was a good distraction.

Varian and Hugo made a good team. They'd efficiently burned through so much information. There weren't many pages left to decode, but these last ones were particularly tricky. Not for the first time, Varian wondered if his mother wrote them in a state of delirium. The possibility existed that they were flat-out indecipherable. Gibberish text trying to be consistent codes. On the other hand, the difficulty was all the more exciting.

Maybe, at last, he would find out what his mother knew about depowering the Storybook. He still believed there was a way to let people who wanted their destinies to keep them, and give those who didn't want their destinies a way out. Everyone could get what they wanted. It would certainly make things easier. That was really the only way this could go down.

Depowering the Storybook of Legends in its entirety would more than ruffle feathers. As far as Varian knew (and he researched this in a night of paranoia), there was no specific *law* in the land of Ever After that said depowering the Storybook was a punishable offense. An unwritten rule, if ever there was one. He highly doubted Queen Snow White, ruler of Ever After, would want his head over this matter, she was no Queen of Hearts. Still, it would be best for everyone if he, and hopefully his mother Ulla, discovered a way to make everyone happy. He could think of more than one person who would be pleased if that was the case. In a way, he could understand it, and respect it.

But all of that would remain pointless theorizing if they didn't decode these last few pages, starting with these two penultimate ones.

The work was methodical. Trial and error. Over and over. It required that no thoughts stray, the methodology easing his anxieties over the larger implications of the work itself. It required that he just work and not think about the other thing—c

Okay, seriously, was was up with these notes?

They were structured like full-page crossword puzzles. It didn't function like a crossword puzzle though. No, that would be too easy.

Varian didn't dare suggest they skip a page. His scientific rationale would never allow him to skip a step. In any case, knowing his luck, the one page they skipped would be the most important page of them all. So, no skipping.

Hugo didn't suggest skipping either. Varian assumed he had similar reasoning.

"Welp," Varian huffed. "That was a bust."

Unfortunately, after hours of trying, far into the night and a little into the morning, they hadn't decoded a single page of the notes.

"If we're staying up any later working on this," Hugo yawned, grasping toward their coffee maker. "I'm gonna make myself a mug. Do you want any?"

The shorter student leaned back in his chair. "Actually," Varian yawned. "I'm gonna try sleeping."

Hugo breathed out a near imperceptible sigh. "In that case," he got up and dropped onto his bed. This would've made Varian laugh if he weren't too tired to do so.

In his exhaustion, his butterflies had finally settled, as did the initial shock of realizing his feelings. It'd been years since he'd had feelings for anyone, not since his childhood crush on Cassandra. If tonight was any indication, this too would pass. Yeah. This could work. This was a reasonable solution. Varian could interact normally with Hugo, bury these feelings, and keep the friendship they'd built. After all, being with his roommate wasn't inherently romantic. Their day to day life didn't exactly offer many opportunities for thinking about romance. He was only friends with one couple!

Surely Varian could breathe easier knowing he only needed to wait this out—

A frantic knocking echoed from their door. Despite acting dead not a moment ago, Hugo was the first to get up and answer. The moment he unlocked the door, it snapped open (nearly whacking poor Hugo in the face). It wasn't really a surprise that she was up late like they were; rather than research notes and chemicals, she'd most likely spent the night working on an artistic endeavor.

"Is that coffee?" Rapunzel rushed inside. Without warning, she beelined for the half-full mug of cocoa on his desk, grabbing it, and downing it in a matter of seconds.

"No?" Varian said, a little concerned, both for his frantic friend, and his roommate steadying himself from the near-hit to the face.

"Did you read my text?" Rapunzel asked.

Varian shook his head. Actually, where was his mirrorphone? Under the papers on his desk?

"Don't bother reading it, I'm gonna tell you," she caught her breath. "I got a message from my friend Briar in the princess group chat—"

Hugo made a noise like he couldn't decide between disgust and amazement. "There's a princess group chat."

"Yes, there's a princess group chat."

Hugo mimed himself vomiting.

Rapunzel didn't have the time to look offended. "She and some friends of hers are putting together a 'secret' dance."

"Calling it secret seems a bit redundant," Hugo commented.

He wasn't wrong. Officially, the school only had one dance per year: Thronecoming, but that wasn't until the second semester. Student organized parties were off limits (though they definitely happened), so they were secret right off the bat. It was a natural progression of logic to conclude that this dance would be off limits too.

"Not really," Rapunzel said. "This one is extra secret... it's for next week's holiday!"

Holiday? Varian puzzled. *What holiday?*

"True Hearts Day!"

Three words that, spoken aloud, felt like a lightning bolt.

True Hearts Day: The holiday that encouraged everyone to follow their true heart's desire. The common interpretation of this description was romantic love, though it wasn't restricted to that category alone. As one would assume, a society whose cornerstone is the concept of destiny, a holiday about following your individual wants and desires was essentially a dead holiday. Celebrations were unheard of, let alone at Ever After High, the school for those with destinies in Ever After. The school that housed the freaking Storybook of Legends itself!

So, yeah, Varian's surprise that anyone, much less a royal, would be throwing a party for the holiday, easily transitioned into glee. If this wasn't a sign of turning tides at this school, he didn't know what was. This was right up Varian's alley.

"Oh, that is fantastic." Beside him, Hugo grinned wide. Funnily enough, he didn't sound like he was making fun of the idea. He was just pleased someone, anyone, was sticking it to the establishment (i.e. Grimm). For someone who wanted to follow his own destiny, Hugo certainly loved a bit of rebellion against royal pricks.

One thought immediately eclipsed Varian's glee. An impulse, more accurately. One that threatened the destruction of everything he was trying to accomplish and all that he held dear.

Varian wanted to ask Hugo out to this dance.

Oh no.

Needless to say, Rapunzel wasn't the only person excited for the secret dance. Royal or Rebel, the student body loved a party. Throw in the thrill factor of it being a secret dance, and you've got yourself the talk of the town. Word spread fast, thanks to the organizers, Cupid, Briar, and Hopper, each recognizable for wearing separate degrees of pink. They fanned the flames, but it burned all by itself.

Coupled with the student body's constant talk of True Hearts Day, Varian's mission to ignore these feelings for Hugo became extremely challenging.

Welcome to Varian's trial by fire!

In class, as everyone else worked on their assignment for the day, Hugo stood up front debating with their Magicology instructor, Madam Yaga, convincing her that yes, this recent assignment could be done with his metal glove. Hugo's gotten permission to use his homemade device in all three of his magical classes as a replacement for traditional magic. Consequently, Hugo's bookmark-like curse, sending every spell he made the old fashioned way backfire spectacularly, did not make an appearance.

The glove was more useful in some instances, less in others. In Science & Sorcery, and Chemistry, more so. With both these classes being taught by Rumpelstilskin, the professor almost seemed annoyed by how well Hugo had managed to keep up using his glove. Magicology, though, posed some challenges. There were some things that a hand held potion maker-machine (that was essentially what the glove was) couldn't do, tasks requiring spells. Yaga tried to step in where she anticipated this, but Hugo's ingenuity always found a way.

It was admirable. Yes, admirable, a totally platonic, unromantic word.

“You heard about the dance?” Nuru asked, attention mostly on her notebook, working out an equation for fun.

Varian kept his cool

“A dance?” Yong jumped into the conversation.

“Friday night.”

“Darn it!” Yong pouted. “I’ll be on my way home by then.”

Traveling to Oz could be a hectic journey anytime of year, but especially at the beginning of winter break. So, the future Scarecrow got permission to leave earlier than other students would. Varian patted his shoulder, though he (like Nuru) had his eyes elsewhere.

Hugo’s argument with Madam Yaga was coming to an end, apparently in his favor if his composure was anything to go off of. By luck or misfortune, his green eyes flickered up to Varian. He gave a two-fingered salute.

I should ask him if he wants to go to the dance.

His goofy smile crumbled.

A pencil tapped Varian’s nose. Nuru, head cocked to the side, silently asking: *What’s with your face?* She analyzed her friend, eyes next snapping to Hugo, heading back to his seat, then back to Varian.

Now would be a great time for a totally reasonable, good answer about why I’m acting so goddamn weird. Varian thought as his ability to form words disappeared.

“For the record,” Nuru spun her pencil. “I knew this was gonna happen.”

“Knew what was gonna happen?” Hugo asked, taking his seat, clueless of Varian’s flustered state.

Ask him.

DON’T.

Nuru to the rescue: “Knew that Varian would take an interest in astronomy,” she tapped her notebook. “Now, how many planets do you think could host intelligent life? I’m trying out a new scenario.”

So, the majority of his classes involving Hugo posed a challenge. But, at least Varian got a reprieve in the form of Hero Training, his one regularly scheduled class without Hugo...

Just kidding! The professors, Professor Knight and Madam Maid Marian, picked THIS WEEK for Hero Training and Damsel-in-Distressing, Hugo’s class, to collaborate for the ENTIRE WEEK.

Thankfully (or unfortunately), Hugo almost exclusively got paired with Cassandra. Cause, goodness, the professors certainly couldn't let a girl save another girl, or a boy save another boy! That would be the end of the world! The heteronormativity wasn't pleasant, however under these circumstances Varian was willing to look on the brightside. Not like it lasted long. The universe still invented ways to humiliate him.

Such as, during the study of projectiles! Fake arrows (really just plastic-foam darts) rained down on the class. Everyone from the Hero Training course was paired to protect someone from the Damsel-in-Distressing class. Varian got Rapunzel, Cassandra got Hugo. The goal was simple. Each pair needed to make it away from the tower where the "arrows" came from, starting from the tower's stone wall. Each hero training student was given a shield. The arrows were sticky, so any that hit your person would stay attached. Any that hit the shield would stay attached to that instead. Those who had the better ratio of arrows on shield to arrows on person would get the better grades.

Varian already had more than a few on his pant legs and shoes; as did Rapunzel (minus the shoes).

The torment didn't end there. Way, way too many of the Hero Training students had crushes on the Damsel-In-Distressing students. That, and the upcoming dance, made for a horrible combination.

"Do you want to go to the dance with me?" One of the hero students, shielding one of the damsel students with a shield, asked.

The damsel student giggled. "Of course I do!"

Varian was going to throw up. He was actually going to vomit.

Another (three) foam darts missed his shield, hitting him and Rapunzel (and his pride). If he was allowed to use magic outside of class, like the students with magical destinies did, he could easily cast a spell to help them avoid these darts. Alas, he didn't want to risk it (he'd already pushed his luck very far in Finders Keepers).

Then ANOTHER (three) darts hit him.

Perhaps Varian could be convinced to risk it.

"You're really bad at this," Hugo yelled to him from where he hid beneath Cass' shield. Neither of them had any arrows on them, though the shield had many.

"Oh, really?" Varian shot back. "I didn't notice."

Hugo said something quieter to Cassandra. She gave him a deadpan stare, shrugged, and promptly shoved him out from under her shield. In a matter of seconds, he was in Varian and Rapunzel's space. "We're switching."

"Is that allowed?" Rapunzel asked, though her excitement undercut the question.

"Probably not," Hugo ushered her along. Rapunzel, bless her (or curse her, Varian wasn't too sure), smirked as she glanced between the two roommates, before running to Cassandra, thoroughly enjoying dodging the projectiles on her way.

Still offering a new explanation, Hugo took his metal glove from his bag, putting it on and loading it with chemical vials.

“Aren’t you supposed to be saving *me* ?” Hugo teased. “Not the other way around?”

Varian’s face felt burnt. “We’re not even partnered up!”

“I know. Heroic of me, right?” Hugo teased.

More projectiles rained down. It was only then that the shorter student realized how poorly he was protecting his new partner. Varian yanked the blond closer, fixing his stance as best he could. He didn’t need to do that. He really didn’t. In a flash, Hugo pressed the palm of his glove to shield. Defying its own trajectory, the dart swerved, hitting the shield.

“Magnetizing gel,” Hugo explained, fixing his glasses. “It appears I surmised the chemical contents of those darts with absolute accuracy.”

Right. Hugo had a magical destiny, he could do that. The glove wasn’t technically magic; that’s why it wasn’t affected by his curse. The professors didn’t need to know that, did they?

“Very clever, Your Highness,” Varian teased half-heartedly, hoping his tone wasn’t giving away his adoration.

“Don’t forget humble,” Hugo offered his elbow, nudging the arm Varian wasn’t using to hold up the shield. “Shall we, Farm Boy?”

Ask him. Varian beat the thought back with a stick.

They made it through, arm in arm, one with a calm demeanor and the other barely containing his butterflies, terror, lovestruck mania; you get the picture. Eventually, the whistle blew, the session was over. Hugo and Rapunzel returned to their half of the class, leaving Varian and Cassandra to return to their own.

“So,” Cassandra started as they put back their class materials, shields, and weapons. “Hugo, huh?”

Varian groaned. “Who told you?”

“Dude,” Cass deadpanned. She proceeded to (gently) bonk him on the head with the blunt end of her sword.

Even outside of classes, the torment didn’t end.

On an outing in Bookend Village, Varian followed Rapunzel and Eugene through the many aisles of Yarns and Noble, the store for yarns (and other fashion materials) and books, texts and textiles, Varian took a slow spit of his hot chocolate, fresh from Hocus Latte (another motivator for this excursion).

As winter break approached, it was getting colder and colder outside. Consequently, Rapunzel needed more knitting/crocheting materials. She’d made it her mission to make new, homemade hats and mittens for all her friends, no matter how much yarn died in the process. Her friends knew not to stand in her way. All they could do was suggest the colors for their gifts.

“Eugene, are you sure you don’t want something specific?” Rapunzel paused, considering her next words carefully,

“Anything you make me, I’ll love it.” Eugene squeezed her hand.

“What if I used mustard yellow?”

“Okay maybe not that.”

Quickly, kindly, he relented, picking out a color scheme. Pleased as punch, Rapunzel added the yarns to her cart. She’s collected the materials for everyone in their group. *Everyone*. Her color palette was worthy of applause. The green she’d picked out for Hugo’s gloves was the exact shade that complimented his eyes. Which Varian wouldn’t even be thinking about if it weren’t for his surroundings.

“Lots of people buying pink and red materials,” Varian mused, scanning his surroundings, “mostly students.”

“Well...” She then revealed the other reason for this visit to Yarns and Noble; the one that he’d been suspiciously withheld from knowing until they got there.

“Myself and a few others from fashion design class are making fits for the occasion.” Rapunzel said with a skip in her step. *The occasion*. An innocuous term for a secret dance. “I can make you something, if you’d like?”

Varian certainly would like that. Regardless of his conflicted feelings regarding the dance, he wasn’t going to turn down Rapunzel’s genius craftsmanship. Plus, at the end of the day, in a vacuum, a dance essentially about rebelling did sound fun.

They went from aisle to aisle, picking out all the materials needed. Varian was particularly happy to have a say in his own outfit. While his favorite color was blue, he also appreciated warm-toned clothes. So, when Rapunzel suggested adding some reds in, fitting for True Hearts Day, he happily trusted her judgement. It was about the only happy component of all this dance-talk, since it didn’t force him to think about—

“Do you know what Hugo will be wearing?” Rapunzel asked. “I could make something for him.”

Varian froze. The couple was watching him like a controlled specimen. Rapunzel, appearing hopeful, and Eugene looking slightly horrified. They knew.

“Oh, wait,” Rapunzel pushed past them, “I can ask him myself!”

And so, because the universe hates Varian with a burning passion, Hugo stood at the end of the aisle, a book in one hand, wearing a dark green winter peacoat. With all the strength he could muster, Varian dragged his friends away.

“Nope.” Nope. “Not happening.”

“Oh,” Eugene sighed, “that’s a relief.”

“Yeah!” Varian agreed, before his meaning hit him, sputtering. “Hey, wait, hold on! I thought you liked Hugo now?”

“I tolerate him,” Eugene corrected. “And I do it for your sake, happily, and if Rapunzel is right—”

“I usually am!” Rapunzel gleefully added.

“She usually is,” Eugene assured, turning back to Varian, “and you want to ask Hugo to the dance —”

Varian coughed out a squawk of a laugh. “Dance? What? Who said nothing about—”

“You have our full support as your friends!”

“Honestly, it’s not a big shock to any of us—”

His embarrassment reaching its peak, Varian summoned the smallest smoke bomb spell he could think of, making a break for it. Wading through shoppers holding pink and red fabrics, Varian willed himself to stop thinking. Stop thinking about the dance, stop thinking about Hugo, and certainly stop thinking about asking Hugo—

The fire alarm went off.

Varian and his smoke bomb spells were permanently banned from the Bookend Village Yarns and Noble from that day forward.

“Anything good?” Varian asked, whispering to his roommate, sitting at the desk next to him. After so many consecutive days of detention, Hugo had the good sense to bring a book. This caught the alchemist’s attention; he’d never known the sorcerer’s apprentice (pending) to be a recreational reader (then again, he wasn’t recreational about much, other than mechanics. He was too professional for his own good).

“Define good?” Hugo mused quietly. “It’s a manual for micromechanics.”

“Oh, so, extremely good.”

“Yeah,” Hugo brightened. “I know mostly everything from experience, but I figured I would brush up on the basics, see if I make Olivia’s life easier.”

“In that case, if you can—”

“I can do anything,” Hugo interrupted. “Please continue.”

“Of course,” Varian rolled his eyes, though he didn’t doubt it, his whole heart bursting with— “*Anyway*, I was thinking a small heating feature would do Liv some good.”

“You mean it would do Ruddiger some good?”

Varian held up his hands in mock-defense. “What can I say? Ruddiger’s been reluctant to cuddle up to his friend since the weather’s getting colder. Metal freezes first.”

“Trust me, she’s aware,” Hugo patted his jacket pocket, where Olivia poked out her head, before scampering down his arm to the book, settling on its pages. When her human friend tried to remove her, she just moved to the other page, back and forth.

This was how it ought to be. This dynamic he’d built with his roommate, was fine the way it was.

Out of nowhere, without anyone bringing up the dance, Varian found himself thinking two terrible words: *Ask him*.

The only thing saving him was the inevitable intrusion of the professor in charge.

“No talking!”

Hugo returned to his book, and Varian to his spiraling thoughts.

All hope was lost. The infection of True Hearts Day had taken over his brain. Either he was hearing about love and romance and dances, and consequently thinking about Hugo, or he was simply in Hugo’s proximity, and that led to thinking about the True Hearts Day dance.

All that he could handle. The worst moments, by far, were when it all became combined, and too loud to ignore.

Historically, Varian and Hugo hadn’t eaten many lunches together. When they had a project to work on, for instance Ulla’s notes, they’d grab whatever food they could and bring it to their room. Occasionally, on days when Varian’s friends had shit to do during lunch, Hugo would stay with Varian. Other times, Hugo would find a quiet place to eat on his own and Varian ate with his larger group of friends. Countless times, he’d invited Hugo to their table. Each time his answer was a polite but firm ‘no thanks.’ So, Varian assumed he could get away with avoiding Hugo at lunch this week.

It was a perfect arrangement.

“I think I’m gonna eat with the others today,” Varian said, absentmindedly. Entirely unprepared for —

“Mind if I squeeze next to you?”

And Varian was suddenly flooded with thoughts of attending a very romantic dance with his roommate. Next thing he knew, they were sitting side by side. So, there they were, and there they’d *been* . All *week*. Hugo at lunch with the whole gang, every day, no longer a question about it. Normally, Varian wouldn’t have been bothered. Far from it! Seeing Hugo get along with his friends was something out of a dream. But why did it have to be *this week* ? Right when twin forces made the castleteria a living hell! First and foremost: Hugo. Second: True Hearts Day.

Talk of the dance popped up everywhere in the school, from the dorms to the halls to the classrooms. Leaving all other space in the dust, the castleteria was the veritable capital of talking-about-secret-dances. The topic came up again and again, conversations on it lasting longer and longer. When Varian stood in line for food, he heard someone talking about what they planned to wear. When he shuffled past students at their tables, he heard friends teasing friends about going with a date. When he searched for his friends, he heard someone being shushed, reminded that it was a ‘secret’ dance.

Not the best kept secret. Varian thought more than once.

The torment didn’t end there! Did it ever end? The answer is no.

“It’ll be great!” Rapunzel said at their table, later in the week. “We don’t have much time until winter break. We need to maximize our fun friend field trips!”

“Fun friend field trips,” Lance echoed. “Say that five times fast.”

Rapunzel did, successfully, say it three times fast. Eugene and Cass applauded her. It didn’t take much convincing to get these long-time friends on board. Some newer friends, however, were quieter than others.

“What about you?” She asked Hugo. “You’ll be joining our merry band, won’t you?”

Varian tried not to stare a hole into the side of Hugo’s head as he watched him, waiting for a real answer. Instead, all the blond offered was a shrug. Aside from this muted acknowledgement, and the occasional snide comment, Hugo kept his opinions on the dance under lock and key. Which was fine! Great, even, because that made Varian’s life much easier. Hugo’s been invited. Rapunzel invited him! Now Varian could stop worrying, thinking, fretting, losing his goddamn shit—

“Freckles,” Hugo nudged him. “Do you have something to add?”

Varian nodded, stabbing at his lunch with his fork.

“Not a fan of dances?”

Varian hummed a little too forcefully.

Someone, anyone, save me from this moment.

“Hey Rapunzel, hi Nuru,” a voice behind Varian greeted, “and everyone else.”

“Hi Briar,” Rapunzel and Nuru said. The princess and practically a princess (of the two of them, Nuru was the only actual member of the royal student council). Varian recognized the new presence immediately.

Briar Beauty. By school standards, she was a bonafide celebrity (spellebrity) in the same vein as Apple White or Ashlynn Ella. All three were destined to star in the Big Three Fairy Tales of the kingdom of Ever After: Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty. Fittingly, Briar looked like a modern sleeping beauty, a valley girl with crown-like sunglasses on her head at all times, outdoors and indoors (as someone who wore goggles at all times, outdoors and indoors, Varian had no right to judge) resting on pink-highlighted brown hair, and matching pink and black dress that resembled an unbloomed rose.

She was also one of the organizers of the secret True Hearts Day dance.

ANYONE ELSE!

Briar offered her mirrorphone to Varian. “If I don’t have your number, add it to my list. I’m getting the contacts out about the you-know-what.”

Mechanically, Varian typed his in, passing the device to Hugo, who immediately passed it on to someone else without adding his number. As this went on, one of his friends asked if the dance would be in someone’s cramped dorm room, or somewhere else.

“I’m renting a place in Bookend for it.” Briar said.

“You can afford that?” Hugo raised an eyebrow. More of a rhetorical inquiry than anything else. Briar raised an eyebrow back. Either because or in spite of her valley girl style, she came across as undeniably royalty. So, yeah, of course she could. Hugo didn’t seem phased. “For a dance that’s supposed to be *secret*, you sure are relaxed about who you hand out details to.”

“A party needs people,” Briar stated. “The risk of getting busted will be there whether we avoid it or not. If we expect and prepare the best, we’ll get a great ragger before it comes crashing down. Though,” she waved, “we’re still keeping it underground cause Grimm’s already on our case,” She spoke so casually that Varian almost missed the implication. This dance could get shut down without ever happening. His roommate didn’t miss it either.

“That’s not reassuring,” Hugo said, an almost undetectable glare on his face.

The general opinion of True Hearts Day, especially from those involved in running Ever After High, was that it wasn’t worth discussing. Some even saw the holiday as dangerous. Varian found that last reason ridiculous. For one, a *holiday* wasn’t going to be the catalyst for rebellion. Most students who rebelled, including Varian, had far more substantial reasons; from unhappy destined endings to simple malcontent with the life laid before them. Any potential damage the holiday could do, Raven Queen did in droves when she refused to sign the Storybook of Legends at Legacy Day. Point in any direction in the castleteria and you’d find yourself pointing at a Rebel.

“Well, I say bravo.” Lance broke the forming ice, “It’s about time people celebrated their feelings,” he threw one arm around Eugene, the other around Rapunzel. “At the very least, it gives these hopeless romantics an outlet.”

“Says the guy who’s favorite plays are romances!” Eugene shot back, laughing.

Varian laughed too. Setting aside the horrors all this talk of love inflicted on him, he was strong enough to admit that a secret dance did, in theory, sound like fun. All struggles with his roommate aside, Varian would definitely be in attendance.

“I’m just glad everyone’s over you and Eugene dating,” Briar directed her words at Rapunzel. “Did you hear about Ashlynn? I’ve got too many royal friends in a total stir over her dating Hunter, when they should be in a stir about the dance!”

“I heard!” Rapunzel exclaimed.

The two princesses ended up striking a separate discussion, leading Briar to sit and squeeze next to Hugo, across from the royal blond (the literal royal, not the I-want-my-destiny royal). Hugo still appeared less than pleased with her presence.

Goodness, Varian was fighting for his life. Even while annoyed, Hugo really had the prettiest green eyes. This was a nightmare.

Anyone other than Briar, Varian begged the universe. *Save me*.

A vision of pink leaned over Briar’s shoulder.

If the color pink was a person, it would be C.A. Cupid; with entirely pink, poofy hair, pink make-up, and pink dress, and the literal wings on her back, ruffling intermittently, she lived up to her name. Varian only knew her vaguely, via Rapunzel, who was on good terms with practically everyone in this school. Cupid’s description was hard to confuse for anyone else.

Varian had no idea what her destiny was. She was a transfer student, though from what school nobody knew; not even Rapunzel.

She was also another organizer of the True Hearts Day dance.

Oh fuck you, universe.

“Did Briar tell you all about—”

A chorus of ‘yes,’ ‘yep,’ and ‘she did,’ followed.

Cupid brought her index finger to her lips. “Keep it on the down-low, all right?”

“Yeah, Goggles,” Hugo leaned into his roommate’s space, sarcastic and sweet, “keep it on the down-low.”

Varian chuckled. Right. As if they weren’t experts in that regard, constantly keeping quiet about Ulla’s notes. “Remind me later, we need to work on that thing.” *The research notes* .

Now it was Hugo’s turn to freeze. He coughed forcefully. “Yep, totally. I will. Later.”

Odd. “What? Scared we can’t crack the code?” Varian teased quietly. “I thought you could do anything.”

Hugo adjusted his glasses, murmuring for only his roommate to hear, “Anything I like. Maybe your dusty old codes are below my league.”

“Oh, that’s rich,” Varian began to counter, gazing unabashedly at him, the familiarity of their banter doing wonders to stamp down these butterflies.

Then, C.A. Cupid sky blue eyes narrowed and fixed on them both. Varian, mostly. Freaky. “If you ever need advice, my mirrorcast show is always happy to take your call.” She spoke with a scary conviction. Then, she fluttered away. Briar followed after her.

Hugo blinked, watching her go. “What was that all about?”

Thankfully, his roommate didn’t know what show Cupid ran. But Varian did. It was all about love.

He was cursed. What else can explain how everything and everyone surrounding him was trying to force him to confront his feelings? It was a probable theory.

The cherry on top of this shit sundae was that all week, right when he needed something to focus on, to distract him away from Hugo, he’d come up empty on fresh ideas for decoding his mother’s notes.

So, to summarize, that was how Varian’s week went. An endless string of fate mocking him. In short: hell. He shuddered to think what Hugo thought of his strange behavior.

True Hearts Day came on Friday.

That day, Damsel-In-Distressing class attended a (still) joint session with the Hero Training course. The damsel students, consisting of Hugo, Rapunzel, and a gaggle of insufferably rich princesses,

were tasked with waiting in one of the school's many training towers, waiting to practice being "rescued" by their assigned "hero."

Hugo was blessed to be assigned to Varian, though (disappointingly) the assignment didn't allow for *seeing* him much. The poor sap was busy with his side of the assignment: the actual rescue. From what Hugo could hear, it involved more than a few trip wires and traps. The sounds of mechanical contraptions in the distance kept Hugo's spirits high.

Unfortunately, those sounds were drowned out by the unending discussions of his fellow students. It'd been a pattern all week. Today, True Hearts Day, it was unavoidable. The topic: the "secret" dance.

Aside from the castleteria, this class was by far the loudest in their discussion of the holiday. The current exercise helped facilitate this. Ms. Her Majesty the White Queen stayed outside the classroom, confirming who among the Hero Training students made it that far. So, every few minutes, when she'd open the door and a damsel practice being "rescued" (it was all very uninteresting to Hugo), all voices ceased. As soon as the door closed again, they continued right where they left off.

Hugo highly doubted the professor couldn't hear them out in the hall. Not his problem. It wasn't his job to make sure everyone kept their excitement for the holiday a secret.

Growing up, Hugo never really heard about True Hearts Day. It was an unspoken holiday, one people had collectively abandoned. No big festivities, no decorations displayed, nothing to indicate anyone ever loved it to any great degree. It wasn't outlawed; not necessarily. In certain circles, though, it was highly discouraged. In places like Ever After High, where destiny was the end all and be all, it could more accurately be called "against the rules."

Funnily enough, the first time Hugo ever heard of it was from Cyrus and Donella (of all people). A few years into his adoption, Cyrus made a half-hearted remark to little-Hugo about bothering him "on a holiday" being rude, leading to questions that the right hand man was uneager to answer. That's when Don stepped in.

It was quickly apparent, even to little-Hugo at that time, that Donella was using True Hearts Day as a jumping off point to complain about Queen Snow White. Not that Hugo could blame her now, nor back then, with all that went down in Ever After that year.

That was a matter nobody wished to converse about: The Evil Queen. The whole reason they had Wonderlandian students and professors (such as Ms. Her Majesty the White Queen) at Ever After High, rather than their own school back home. Under normal circumstances, these students would come to Ever After for Legacy Day, sign the Storybook, and go on their way. Under *normal* circumstances.

Long story short: the Evil Queen cursed the entirety of Wonderland, leading to it being sealed off in front of the rest of the fairytale world. In all likelihood, despite it not being her story to curse Wonderland, she was still following her destiny of being evil, she did not disappear like others who broke from their fate (for instance, Ulla; assuming that's what happened to her when she left her farm). Instead, the Evil Queen was imprisoned in a mirror.

The curse lingered in Wonderland with no one to undo her magic, leaving Wonderland ever at risk of being destroyed. Powerful curses, and cursed objects, were difficult for anyone other than the creator to undo. The Evil Queen remained alive. That curse wasn't going anywhere.

It was quite the scary story, one even die-hard royals didn't often call upon as an example for the dangers of "rebellious." Scarier still was the notion of what she could've done after Wonderland, if given the chance.

But that was old news. Back when it was new news, little-Hugo had bigger things to worry about. Donella, however, had all the freedom and time to complain about its effects. It wasn't a big surprise that Queen Snow White, upon her ascent to the throne she was destined to have, gradually reduced observance of the holiday that encouraged following your true heart's desire. After all, what if your true heart's desire was to do evil?

Would Raven Queen, if she ever followed her destiny and took up the role as evil queen (a seat-warmer until Apple White's destiny played out), fortify those celebrations? Would that count as evil? Not that it mattered. Apple White would probably do the same as her mother, eventually. Thus was the cyclical nature of Ever After power structure, thanks to destiny.

In any case, Donella wasn't the kind of person to go out of her way to make her opinions known, so she didn't go on at length. Most of what she said went over little-Hugo's head anyway. The real, only, standout statements were straightforward: *"How much of that 'goodness' would dash away if she wasn't certain of her power? What lengths would she go to get it back? Any and all, I'd assume. She's, no, all those royal pricks, would..."* Then she trailed off.

Hugo hadn't thought of that moment in years. He'd almost forgotten, Now, the memory gave him pause. What an odd thing for Donella to say. Any hatred of the royals aside... *Donella wants destiny to stay as it is.* She's said as much, and her actions have backed it up. She was *literally* studying the Storybook of Legends to make sure it worked right!

Then again, hadn't Donella helped Ulla with her research on a way to depower the Storybook? Perhaps, once upon a time, Ulla had the same hopes as her son did: that some could keep their fates and others could be free of them, simultaneously. A peaceful solution, no one gets robbed of anything.

Hugo felt a potent sympathy for Ulla, and for Don, for when they both discovered the truth (the one Donella had told Hugo; saved him the disappointment ahead of time), and the chips were down...

A distant, familiar voice broke him from his musings. Somewhere out there, beyond that door, his roommate was trying his best (and from the sounds of it swearing like a sailor).

For better or worse, Hugo decided Varian's presence was an utter necessity. This week, though, Varian had been acting... weird, this week. He couldn't figure out what was up with him. It didn't seem to be anything Hugo did, at least, he hoped it wasn't something like that.

A dainty laugh, clear and sweet like a bell, pulled Hugo from his musings. He leaned toward the only tolerable person in the room. "I'm surprised Apple White over there is supporting this secret dance."

"I happen to know she likes True Hearts Day," Rapunzel informed him. "She doesn't totally agree with her mother's stance on it all."

Hugo didn't buy that, but it led him to an idea. Seeking the advice of more experienced Varian-friends might be worth the trouble.

"You've known Varian a long time, right?" Hugo started.

Rapunzel nodded.

“So, what’s up with him this week?” Hugo tried not to sound too concerned.

“Oh,” she gaped at him. “So you noticed... all that?”

“It’s kinda hard to miss.”

Rapunzel stared at him for a very long time. “What’s your guess?”

“You’ve got no idea either?” Hugo deadpanned.

Rapunzel held a hand over her mouth.

Weird. Another giggle in the distance distracted him. Hugo hummed. “It’s got something to do with this dance everyone keeps going on about,” he posited. “He freaks at the mere mention of it.”

Rapunzel gave no rebuttal. “I’ll say this much: Varian’s smart. Like, really smart—”

“He’s brilliant,” Hugo said easily, his chest light. “He sees the little details that make everything make sense.”

“At the same time,” Rapunzel continued, “he has a tendency to get lost in his head about the simplest things. Sometimes he needs someone to yank him back, get him out of the mud.”

A few examples Hugo himself had seen of this came to mind. The project before Legacy Day, their tunnel vision when they’d both gotten sick.

“What does that have to do with the dance?”

At their feet, Olivia and Pascal chirped louder, having a grand old time. The chameleon had turned the same gold color as the robotic mouse. Hugo deemed it to be adorable. The princess did too, oohing and awing as she continued speaking. “Sometimes, the mud can make Varian a pessimist. Expect and prepare for the worst. So, a secret dance with a high risk of being shut down before it ever even happens might make him, oh I don’t know,” she pretended to pick her words cautiously. “A bit cautious about being optimistic.”

Hugo frowned. That didn’t sound like his roommate.

Varian was an optimist. He was the one who stuck by these steadfast convictions in absurd things. Including, but not limited to, Hugo’s curse being a bookmark, a real connection to the Sorcerer’s Apprentice destiny. In addition, the baseless (and as Donella informed him, fruitless) assumption that the Storybook of Legends could be partially depowered, letting everyone who wanted their destiny have it and everyone who didn’t want theirs free to choose their own path. Varian was an optimist. A near delusional, deeply admirable one. How could he be anything else?

Then again pessimism, the fear of going ‘poof’, made him sign the Storybook on Legacy Day. Then again, since he’d come back, he’d been steadfast in his optimism and hope. What great challenge had him retreating back to pessimism? Was it truly as simple as a dance?

“Does that make sense?” Rapunzel asked, far too fretful, almost like she was selling a lie. Hugo nodded; he couldn’t picture her lying.

The door opened once more, and the room went quiet.

Varian had arrived, still catching his breath, hair a mess, a few singed spots on his clothes, and a sizable chunk taken out of his wooden sword. So, a train wreck. Hugo smiled.

“I’m here to save you,” Varian waved at his roommate, unenthused to a degree human kind never thought possible.

Hugo stood up, fluttering his eyelashes, absolutely playing up the drama. “My hero!”

Varian was entirely unamused, inversely to Hugo, who was entirely amused.

Since his conversation with Rapunzel, Hugo found himself pondering her words over and over again. Was that truly what had been bugging Varian? A dance? It wouldn’t be the first time Varian put his hopes on something small and silly (and ultimately extraordinary fun). Finders Keepers demonstrated that.

Was that the answer?

All this thinking left him reflective through the last of his classes, detention, and finally in his dorm, where he lay on his bed staring up at nothing, taking a very long break from helping his roommate decode Ulla’s notes on the Storybook of Legends. Hugo couldn’t quite push the idea away.

Scribbling noises filled the room, drowning out the silence. Varian was totally engrossed in his work.

Ruddiger was trying to jump up to the window sill.

Is he not seeing this?

Ruddiger was succeeding at jumping up to the window sill. That creature had no sense of balance. This wouldn’t end well.

Hugo said, waving a hand in front of his line of sight. Varian jolted into awareness.

“Your rat is trying to fly again.” Any more delay, and Hugo would’ve grabbed the furry friend himself. He didn’t need to though. As soon as Varian saw, he rushed to his furry friend, nabbing him before he managed to get too high.

On Hugo’s own desk, Olivia sat smugly (as smugly as a metal mouse can) watching the raccoon’s antics. Hugo had never loved her more.

“Any luck on those two pages?”

Varian groaned, setting Ruddiger down. “None. It’s like she wanted no one to read this. I’m telling you, these ones are gonna have something good. Something worth a whole week’s effort.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Goggles.” Hugo adjusted his goggles for him. Varian didn’t even seem to notice, too wrapped up in his work once more. “If that’s how you wanna spend this lovely holiday.”

That got his attention. Varian's gaze traveled anywhere else but toward his roommate, his freckles framed in red.

Rapunzel's words returned to Hugo's mind, as did his doubt.

Is that "secret" dance really what's making him act like this? Is he that worried it will be shut down?

Then again, it wasn't unthinkable. Up on the flying staff, when Varian rattled off about how much love and care he and his own friends put into the game, Hugo listened. Varian saw it as important, not a distraction or a frivolous side quest, and Hugo respected that. More than respected. Varian's infection dedication was rubbing off on the blond.

Unlike the dance, though, Finders Keepers had the advantage of being an intimate affair. A handful of students knew about it, and all of them knew how to keep their mouths shut. Asking a whole student body to do the same was a less manageable task.

All this theorizing was pointless. Hugo dealt in certainties (when he could). He got up from his bed. Olivia took this opportunity to scamper up to his shoulder. He gave her a scratch. When was the last time he brought her out for the day? Maybe it was time for a little Liv field trip.

"You know," Hugo sat on Varian's desk, much to his chagrin, "you don't have to act all high and mighty. I work hard too, but I can appreciate some good old-fashioned fun."

"Even when it's against school policy?" Varian grumbled, absentmindedly.

"*Epecially* when it's against school policy," Hugo jeered. "Don't forget who led you to a near-victory in your extremely school rule breaking game last week."

"Just gonna skirt past the 'almost' in that victory, huh?"

"I'm not hearing a denial," Hugo said, sing-songily, as Varian scoffed, "about my victoriousness, nor about your barely concealed excitement for this dance."

Varian took in a quick breath, eyes wide. Had Hugo taken the wrong approach? Then, frustration exploded across the freckled student's features.

"For the record," Varian started, his voice soft. "Yeah, okay? I am looking forward to that dance. Why shouldn't I? Lot of people are! If it ends up happening—"

He's definitely worried the dance will be called off. Hugo thought, with a lot more relief than he expected. A part of him hadn't been fully convinced he hadn't caused Varian's off-brand behavior, somehow.

"—I'm sure lots of people will have fun! Not just couples. Not that that's what you were implying, but... it sounds like it'll be fun, and it's not because I *like* anyone, or anything, I don't—"

That spoken detail left Hugo with a pang of... something? His roommate left him no time to dissect that feeling.

"— honestly, I don't love, *like*, all the talk of romance surrounding this dance. I'm not against romance! Why would I be? But, come on, it's for True Hearts Day, right? Right! Since when does following your heart *have* to be about romance?" Varian seemed to be stringing words together

without forethought. “Is it too much to ask that I enjoy a dance with my friends without all that fuss and complications and heart wrenching bullshit of—” Hugo tapped Varian’s nose, shutting him up.

“Oh good, an ‘off’ button.”

“Hey!”

Hugo chuckled. “You don’t need to justify how you feel. Believe me, I totally understand.”

“You don’t say?” Varian choked.

Hugo slid off the desk, draping himself over the back of Varian’s chair. “Consider me thankful that my destiny doesn’t suffer through some cheesy, glittering love story full of impassioned declarations and swooning,” a cringing expression springing up. “Not my thing.”

“Yeah, not my thing either,” Varian sighed a very heavy sigh. “But a fun dance with my friends?” he smiled, more assured. “That, I think I can handle. That would be perfect.”

Hugo smiled too. *It can’t be any worse than Finders Keepers.* He thought, knowing damn well he would join Finders Keepers again in a heartbeat. Guess that said something about this dance.

“So?” Hugo leaned down to Varian’s ear. “You gonna ask me to go with you, Farm Boy?”

It was a joke. Business as usual, meantime to be taken as all their playful jokes were. So, imagine Hugo’s surprise when his roommate’s reaction was anything but usual. He stopped moving. He seemed to stop breathing too.

Then, Varian abruptly spun his chair 180 degrees, plainly trying to shake Hugo off it. Unfortunately, this made him lose his balance, falling (collapsing) into Varian’s space, managing to catch himself on the armrests of his chair, his face remarkably close to Varian’s face. Gloved hands shoved his mug away, knocking his glasses ajar.

My friend is such a goof. As he happily stumbled back, he managed to grab Varian’s forearms, yanking him out of his chair and onto his feet.

“Oh, I see,” Hugo laid on the drama, spinning his roommate around as if they were moving to some unheard music, “You need to know if I can dance, right?”

“Hugo!” Varian spun, attempting to catch his breath. “I—!” he laughed, red once more. His big blue eyes had an utterly endearing habit of sparkling when he laughed, as they did now. Of all the laughs Hugo had caused in his life, Varian’s was by far the most rewarding.

Eyes met, and for a moment it seemed like his roommate had something to say.

Then, redder than before, Varian jumped away.

“Oh geez, wow, look at the time!” he guffawed, breathless. “I’ve gotta go meet Rapunzel. I made a promise. Can’t break those loosely. What kind of friend would I be if I—” His voice cracked a bit at the end of his sentence. He’d been doing that a lot lately. Was he getting sick?

Then he left the room. From how harshly he swung the door, Hugo half expected to see it come off its hinges. Varian didn’t seem as concerned, out of sight and on his way to goodness knows where.

That guy, Hugo shook his head, *sure is selective about what events he's embarrassed to be excited for*. A genuine appreciation for this holiday, and this secret dance, formed. It made his roommate happy. That was reason enough to be thankful for it.

How many more joyous, rebellious days would Varian have?

Without thinking, Hugo glanced back on Varian's desk, still littered with papers, crumpled and clean, all surrounding an old notebook, thick and worn, Ulla's research. A weight settled on his chest, invisible and inevitably crushing him. Bit by bit. Word by word.

Varian hadn't cracked through the ciphers yet. There was the word, the one that formed the biggest weight. *Yet*.

An indignant (as indignant as a metal mouse could be) squeaking caught his ear.

"Relax. I haven't forgotten your field trip," Hugo whispered down to Olivia, grabbing his coat and bag.

There was no professor in Fashion Design that afternoon.

Unlike other classrooms, off limits to students outside of regularly scheduled class times, the ongoing projects in Fashion Design class required that its students have consistent and unimpeded access to the necessary materials and tools. Students weren't allowed to take whole sewing machines back to their rooms after all (though more than one student had tried at one point or another; including Rapunzel)!

On this particular day, the room was crowded with students, even those who had no business being in fashion design, sewing additions to their class assigned pieces or for the true hearts day attire. Mostly the latter. Last minute scrambling, in both cases.

In her own corner of the room, Rapunzel stood surrounded by pieces had been working on for days. There'd be no last minute scrambling from her. Varian wasn't surprised. So, he stood still, observing these things, trying to center *only* on them, but his heart kept on racing, still recovering from the chaos in his room.

That was too close. Physically too close, and emotionally too close. The words nearly left his mouth, nearly destroyed everything. He needed to get a grip. One joking dance, one half-hearted hope that Hugo might genuinely go to the dance, and Varian nearly crumbled.

Luckily, he didn't need to worry about running back to Hugo in the next hour or so.

"Almost done," Rapunzel said. That was the third time she'd said that. Artistry took time, be it painting on a canvas or measuring clothes. She added another pin to the unfinished vest, meant to go over his shirt, keeping it in place. One of the items she wanted help with in preparation for the dance was part of the piece she'd made precisely for him. So, there he stood, letting her model it on him as she worked out the sizing and angles of the fabric on him.

"While I've got you here," *under threat of being poked by a sewing needle*, Varian thought as Rapunzel continued speaking. "Do you want to talk about anything? Or anyone? Pertaining to a certain holiday-themed dance happening tonight?"

Varian buried his head into his gloves. “Must we?”

“Hold still! I don’t wanna poke you,” Rapunzel cautioned.

When he offered no response, Varian dared to peek between his fingers. Rapunzel gave him a look, pointed and worried at the same time. Deep down, Varian knew he could talk to her about anything.

“From what I recall, you already asked him if he wanted to go,” Varian muttered behind his gloves. “He wasn’t very responsive.”

“Neither were you!” Rapunzel rolled her eyes. “If *you* personally asked him, he would agree to go.”

Slowly, Varian lifted his head, messing with his hair. “You’re exaggerating.”

“I’m not even sugar coating it,” Rapunzel shook her head. “He’s your friend! If you don’t want to admit your feelings, ask him as a friend! You know that’s an option, right?”

“Of course I know that,” Varian held his goggles.

“So ask him! Why not give it a try?”

“Because!” Varian exclaimed, with no small amount of torment, arms flailing. “I don’t want to ask him as a friend. I want him to be my *date*. And that’s the problem!” A sharp pain burst from his side. “Ow!”

“Sorry, sorry,” she said, genuine and scolding. “You seriously need to stop moving.”

If that doesn’t summarize my whole week... froze in place, Varian’s mind moved, and kept moving. All week, it’d been a problem infecting all that he loved about his dynamic with Hugo. Varian was an alchemist, so he knew what it looked like when a controlled experiment got out of control. This whole situation was like a bubbling cauldron, a shattered glass vial with acid spilling out, a loose screw, an unlabeled element. It’s reckless to just toss it in and expect it all to be okay.

“Look, it’s nothing against Hugo. Hugo’s great! Hugo’s...” a million words, each sweeter than the last.

Silent though she was, Rapunzel looked the smuggest he’d ever seen her be.

“As I was saying,” Varian coughed, “he’s my friend, maybe my best friend. We trudged the long way getting to where we are, and I’m not so selfish that I’d throw it all away on a whim.”

Rapunzel said nothing, leaving Varian suddenly unsure whether he was looking for pushback or reassurance.

“It’s a good thing we’re Rebels, then,” Rapunzel squeezed his shoulder, pinks safely tucked away. “Living life without a script is scary, and it comes with the possibility of things not being okay. But, they could also end up better than you imagined, or planned.” She jostled his shoulders. “At the end of the day, it’s *your* heart. Only you can figure out what you’ll do with it.”

Varian smiled. Somehow, somehow, she knew exactly what to say. The comfort didn’t solve his problem, however it did make him feel better. Better enough to joke about it all, at least. “All of

this worrying might be pointless,” Varian grimaced. “I haven’t been good about hiding my feelings.”

“I know,” Rapunzel shook her head. “Hugo flat out asked me what was up with you this week.”

“He what?!” Varian said, way too loud.

“Hey! Hey! I didn’t spill your beans. I told him you were worried about the dance being called off. That’s all.”

That explains all Hugo’s prodding. Though that didn’t stop Varian from spiraling once more. To distract himself he watched Rapunzel work, helping where she asked, giving opinions. Anything and everything he could do. All strife aside, it was nice to have a friend like her. Next chance he got, he absolutely must treat her to a lunch in Bookend.

Tapestries of chemical compounds, of molecules, were more Varian’s speed. Still, he could appreciate the effort it took to make anything of fabric. Woven together, thread by thread, piece by piece. It was intricate, which Varian could appreciate, and equate to his work with the magic of science, the science of magic, the core principles of alchemy. Everything held tightly together, the smallest components going unnoticed. Like atoms in an object. Like letters in a word.

Like letters in a word.

Without thinking, Varian tried to run. He took all of one step before a hand gripped the back of his shirt, bringing him to a nonnegotiable stop. Beside him, Rapunzel waited.

“The vest isn’t done.”

Slowly, carefully, with respect, he handed over the unfinished item.

“Thanks again you’re the best, bye!” Varian didn’t wait for a reply, out the door and down the hall in a flash. If this new idea actually worked, he would have a worthy distraction at last! He wouldn’t leave his desk for the rest of the day. No time to ask Hugo out if all his focus was on decoding research notes! Who knows, maybe today he’d finally learn what he needed to know; finally find a path toward the lives everyone wanted.

Chapter End Notes

Hugo realize-Varian-caught-feeling-for-you Challenge. Difficulty: Impossible.

As you can probably tell from the title, this is a two parter. Originally I intended it to be one very long chapter, but with how much content is in part 2, and how important I find part 2 to be, that wasn’t feasible. The next chapter is mostly done (YIPPEE), and is in the late editing stage atm. I’m cooking like you wouldn’t believe.

Thank you for reading!! Hope you enjoy it! Whether the weather is warm or cold where you are, please take care of yourself, don’t fall into an unhealthy sleep schedule (hypocrite that I am, saying that), and DRINK SOME WATER!!!!

See y'all in part 2!

True Hearts Day Part 2

Chapter Summary

With the dance half a day away, as Varian gets closer to cracking the penultimate pages of Ulla's research, Hugo (knowing what awaits somewhere in those unknown codes) does whatever he can to prepare for the inevitable (his roommate's emotional stability taking a nosedive).

Too bad that means working with the most insufferable people he's ever met.

Chapter Notes

pulls up to the curb, throws this out the window, floors it, drives into a mailbox

Y'all ready for angst?! TRICK QUESTION CAUSE I'M POSTING IT REGARDLESS!

More than any other song, the one that gets the whole chapter in a nutshell is "Under Pressure" by Queen/Davie Bowie.

Hope you enjoy this chapter! Alternate title: "Hugo Rearranges Deck Chairs on the Titanic"

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Though Hugo had no great expectations for True Hearts Day, nor for this supposed dance that was secretly scheduled for that evening, he found himself strangely disappointed by how cold the air was on this holiday. He wasn't the only one.

After all that eagerness to go outside and stretch her little legs, running countless circles in the cool grass, Olivia had quickly returned to a state of demanding (squeaking) to be brought back into the warmth of the indoors. That was Hugo's interpretation of her squeaking anyway, though he may be biased.

He'd spent too much time away from his work on those penultimate pages of Ulla's research. Whether Varian was there or not, he *should* be decoding them, no matter how horrible the mere notion made him feel. That was part of why he'd indulge Olivia's demands for a mini field trip; he'd hoped the cold air would do him some good too.

Did it? No! But, a guy could dream.

As Hugo crossed the front doors' threshold back into Ever After High, the unwelcome sound of the Headmaster's voice, distant and certainly not talking to him, slowed Hugo's gait.

Down an adjacent hall, an awkwardly stacked pyramid of pink boxes sat next to three pinkly-dressed students. Further down, a delivery crew was making their way out of the building. Hugo recognised the first and second students: C.A. Cupid and Briar Beauty, who he'd had the misfortune of speaking to at lunch a few days ago. The third took him a moment to actually remember: Hopper Croakington III, arguably the most awkward person in the school (made all the more glaring by his bookmark that turned him into a literal frog when he became tongue tied), wearing an absurd little crown and bowie, perhaps in an attempt to compensate for his inability to play it cool.

This sight was a perfect example of that!

"So all these heart themed cakes are for your 'play'?" The Headmaster inquired.

"Yes! Our play!" Cupid said, doubling down on the half-assed excuse for why they had a party/dance appropriate number of confectionery items with them. "They're for that really funny scene where Briar," Cupid picked up a cake, "throws them at Hopper!"

"Excuse me!" Hopper croaked, immediately fumbling their lie.

Oh, they're not getting away with this. Hugo thought urgently. Under better circumstances (i.e. if Hugo wasn't saddled with a bookmark-like curse), he might've sent a small shock spell at Grimm, giving those poorly prepared party peeps an opportunity to slip away. However, these were not good circumstances for Hugo's magic; he didn't want to accidentally light anyone on fire (no matter how tempting the action would be, when directed at certain school administrators).

Though, it seemed he wouldn't have to. Blatantly unconvinced, Headmaster Grimm still muttered a curt "Very well" and walked away (luckily not in Hugo's direction). The trio seemed relieved, and to their credit they had the right to be. Still, a seasoned breaker of rules (the rule of law; thievery and all) such as Hugo knew better. They weren't off the hook yet. Suspicion was one step away from apprehension. If they were smart (two out of three of them were royals, so he certainly had his doubts) they would be more cautious with their party supplies from there on out. It wouldn't be a stretch to imagine Grimm sending someone to keep a closer eye on the school entrance/exit for the rest of the day.

In his coat pocket, Olivia popped out, squeaking indignantly, as if to say *What's the hold up! Get moving!* Hugo gave her a pat, adjusted his on-the-go bag (his metal glove safely inside; he'd gotten into the habit of bringing it on outings, cause you never know...), and continued back to his dorm.

The dance wasn't his problem. Life would be easier if it *was* his problem, but it wasn't. More than once, he almost turned back. With all his expertise in avoiding suspicion and trouble, Hugo could've gotten them out of that kerfuffle, given some advice, but that would draw attention to himself. The last thing he needed was to get himself into unnecessary trouble; not now, as the days dragged on, waiting with more and more dread for Don to contact him. Covering for the organizers of a very against-the-rules dance was not the way to get her attention.

Still, the disappointment remained potent. Weird, since he hadn't actively been looking forward to the dance. Sure, he teased Varian about acting all embarrassed about wanting to go (still a perplexing development, almost suspiciously so) but it wasn't like he had any skin in the game. Hell, Varian hadn't even insisted he go, *disappointedly* hesitant (obviously given his worries that the dance would be shut down), leading back to the main point: this strange sense of disappointment.

Best not to think about it.

Finally in his dorm's main hallway, a noise in the distance caught his ear. Running. Someone was running. Closer and closer, then turning the corner.

"Hugo!" The instant Varian saw his roommate, his foot caught on the rug, tripping him, sending him face planting onto the floor.

"Shit!" Hugo ran to him. "Are you—"

Varian scrambled up, smiling like he hadn't noticed the painful fall he'd taken. They met halfway, with Varian wrapping both his arms around one of Hugo's elbows before effectively dragging him along. Too confused to complain (as if he would've WHOOPS WHO SAID THAT) Hugo couldn't find the words to question his roommate's frantic state, even as they all but tumbled into their dorm room.

Letting go of his arm, Varian threw himself at his desk, sifting through papers with reckless abandon before finding what he was looking for. Taking the nearest blank sheet, he began to write, his eyes on the unreadable research notes, murmuring furiously.

At the same time, rudely awoken by the frenzy, Ruddiger jumped into racing between the two students, then between the beds, then randomly throughout the room. From his pocket, Olivia emerged, jumping down and joining her furry friend, only worsening their recklessness, throwing a few too many items out of sorts. Hugo tried to catch her, terrified she or the raccoon would break something (everything).

"Goggles! A little help here!" By the time the words were out, he lost track of Olivia.

"I knew it!" Varian exclaimed, eyes glued to his task for about two more seconds. Then Ruddiger climbed onto the desk and launched himself into Varian's chest with enough inertia to tip his chair, which Hugo managed to catch before he could crack open his head, bringing them remarkably close.

By virtue of Varian's odd behavior all week, Hugo's immediate expectation was that he would stutter, or freeze, though he didn't fully understand why this was his first assumption. Instead, Varian grinned like a mad man, eyes wide and face practically glowing. "It's a tapestry!"

"A what?"

Varian made a noise like a screeching giggle. "All the letters are woven together like fabric. But, with the complexity notched up to a hundred. Forms these irregular spirals, but once you know how to look, the words keep showing up one after the other. It's absolutely mesmerizing stuff," Varian waved one of the papers before slamming it down. "At this rate, we'll have this done by the end of the day! One step closer to finding a world where we both get what we want. One life with a destiny, and one without it."

Hugo peered down at the paper. Varian had only decoded three words, that was more progress than they'd made in weeks, so he was right to celebrate. Three words. His roommate's blood ran cold as he read.

I was wrong

Those three words could mean anything; could refer to anything. Yet, in his heart, Hugo knew what they meant. The day of reckoning. The death of hope. The truth that Donella let Hugo know only a week after Legacy Day: All or nothing. All destinies happen or no destinies happen.

“Either the Storybook is capable of being de-powered, and no one gets a story, or it stays as it is. There is no middle ground. You’ll see.”

“I see,” Varian tapped the paper, brows furrowed, coming down from his high. “This might be a little more difficult than I thought. I’m gonna just stay here, work on this until the dance...” he trailed off, as if pulled by a more urgent thought.

Right! One more cherry on top of this shit sundae, the dance was probably going to get shut down before it began because those royals already got themselves spotted and under suspicion. Great! So great! Really—

A squeaking broke through him.

In the doorway sat Olivia, though she didn’t stay there. Satisfied she had her human friend’s attention, she disappeared into the hallway.

In any other instance, Hugo would’ve been a tad annoyed that his robotic mouse friend wanted to go outside *again* after demanding to go out and be brought back inside in such a short span of time. In any other instance, but not this one.

“I think Olivia could use some air,” Hugo said, halfway to the door. He still had his coat on, his bag on his shoulder, and he couldn’t stay there, he just couldn’t.

“Wait!” Hugo heard rather than saw Varian scramble from his chair, but he *felt* his hand grab his arm, not tight at all but bringing him to a dead stop.

Then, heart racing in the worst manner it could, Hugo made his worst mistake: he gazed back at Varian, hair a mess from all that running and big blue eyes filled with hesitation. Hugo was sure that he didn’t look frazzled; he’d spent years perfecting his ability to appear serene in any situation. Was he losing this skill? Did Varian see something Hugo didn’t account for? If Varian dared to ask him what was wrong, he wasn’t sure any attempt at lying would make it past his throat. “Do you want to go?”

Hugo blinked. “Huh?”

“The dance,” Varian coughed out, “*to* the dance.”

Not that it did much good, but the change in topic startled Hugo enough to pause his spiral.

“You said earlier that all that lovey-dovey crap isn’t your thing, and it isn’t *my* thing either, I don’t *like* anyone, currently—” Varian coughed again, loudly, avoiding eye contact, “but I figured it could be not-our thing... together?”

That earnest tone repelled Hugo, threatening to crumble what little composure he had left intact. What else could he say? Even if his mind wasn’t half falling to pieces at the moment, it was an

invitation to hang out with his roommate. He'd look forward to that, if nothing else. If the dance *happened at all*.

"I'd like that," he summoned a smile, small and typical.

"Great," Varian deflated, far more relieved by this exchange than Hugo could rationalize. Backing away, hand releasing his arm. "Like I said, I'm gonna keep working here, so I guess I'll see you late—"

Hugo didn't stick around long enough to hear the rest.

In the first place, it should be noted that Hugo had no clue where he was going. All he knew was he couldn't be in that room.

Had it been selfish to hope the truth would wait one more page? Then again, whether it was revealed in these penultimate pages, or the very last one, did it make any difference? The truth was the same either way.

Either Varian would attempt to depower the Storybook and become the enemy of everyone with a destiny (i.e. Snow White and every other literal royal), or leave the world the way it was and suffer the life he didn't want. Those were Varian's only real options. Then again, it wasn't much of a choice. If Varian tried to depower the Storybook regardless of everything else, Donella would stop him.

What would she do to Varian? No, that wasn't the right question. For as long as Hugo knew her, Donella picked her words carefully, kept her actions measured, and didn't extend her hand if she thought the business would get messy. If there was a job to be done, it was Hugo or Cyrus who did it. So, it wasn't a question of what she would do, but of what she would ask one of them to do.

Maybe that's what all this waiting was about. She wanted Hugo to understand the severity, the importance of what she'd ask, when she finally did speak to him again. A move like that wouldn't be a surprise coming from her. Still, the suspense was unbearable.

If not me, then Cyrus. Perhaps she'd already sent word out of what her plan was.

Taking out his mirrorphone, Hugo dialed the less scary option's number.

Cause hey, far back as he could recall, the right hand man was always easier to find, easier to get a word out of, and far less scary to talk to. Still a bit scary though (implying more about Don than it did about him). Though he hadn't heard from Cyrus since before his bookmark-like curse appeared, Hugo reasonably deduced that he could still call and try to get some answers.

The line didn't ring.

"We're sorry. The number you've dialed has been disconnected. Thank you."

That would be Hugo's luck, wouldn't it? Not only to be ignored, but cut out entirely! If Cyrus had gone to such lengths, there was no way Donella hadn't done the same. They both must be busy. In fact, Don was definitely busier today, with her weekly meeting with Grimm happening later; same time, end of the week, every week. It'd be pointless to reach out; a plague on the psyche to think of it at all. Yet, worse was to think of Varian, soon to be shattered by his lack of real options.

Hugo found himself attempting to call her, despite knowing the line wouldn't ring—

The line rang.

Panic rose to new heights as Hugo canceled the call, desperate not to seem desperate. Terrified of answers most terrifying. Ouroboros eating itself alive. He couldn't breathe.

That was why, combined with his panic, he acted on a momentary lapse in judgement. He needed to be alone, somewhere no one would see him like this. Wracking his brain, scanning the walls, he searched for a familiar, almost imperceptible crack. The secret tunnels; there, he could be alone. Pressing a particular spot, the wall creaked open.

"Move! Move!" A high voice echoed down the hall. Before he could question it, the pinkly-dressed trio he'd seen not twenty minutes earlier came running at him. Each of them was holding four or five confectionery boxes, stacked high and dangerously. They spotted Hugo, frozen in perplexment. "Hold that door!"

Without thinking, dazed and in a sudden mindset of this-might-as-well-happen-to-me-today, Hugo stepped aside, letting all three of them in, shutting the wall-door behind him right as he finally regained his ability to speak. "What the hell are you—"

The trio shushed him as stomping footsteps grew louder. A huffing and puffing Headmaster marched by without stopping, further and further away. A minute passed. The silence stretched on. The cost was clear.

"Where does this secret tunnel go?" Cupid whispered, a little perturbed by the unkempt appearance of the space, and way too interested for his liking.

"Out." Hugo answered (it was the truth, they did lead out of the school) and demanded, kicking open the wall door. One by one, all four of them exited. "Were you running from Grimm?"

The trio expressed varying degrees of candor, with Briar having the least. "Unofficial party planning business. Nothing to concern yourself about."

"Are you *trying* to get caught?" Hugo stressed. This wasn't his circus, however, if there was one thing Hugo couldn't abide by, it was a poorly planned scheme.

Confusion and offense read across all their faces. He didn't give them a chance to answer, busy taking the extra boxes of cakes from their hands. "Why the hell would you have these delivered to the school? The dance is happening somewhere outside of this campus, right? You should've sent it directly there."

"No duh," Briar rolled her eyes. "Do you think we're stupid?"

"I have my suspicions." Not waiting for a response, Hugo adjusted his hold on the cake boxes. "Where do these need to go?"

While the two royals looked at him like he was a perplexingly judgemental asshole (guilty as charged), Cupid's expression was different. Steady. Hugo knew that look. She was studying him, or trying to. He wasn't exactly an open book to others, yet he couldn't help but get the sense that she was staring into his soul. What was her destiny again? Then, she smiled like she knew him well. She didn't, of course, but that didn't stop Hugo from feeling that way. She nodded to the princess who, in turn, shrugged, leading the way.

"Hey!" Hopper ran after her. "Are you sure we should—"

"For the record," Briar yawned, unbothered to a degree that repulsed Hugo, "we tried to send the packages to the dance's location, it's a reception hall in town. But the owner said no deliveries of any kind."

"Plus, with how many we needed to send, trying to get an exception was hopeless," Cupid chimed in. "We were just about to move everything, actually."

"None of your supplies are already there?" Hugo felt faint. "How much is there?"

"Oh my god."

Half of Briar's dorm room, her living space, if he could call it that, was hoarded with packages stacked so tall the walls weren't visible. Some were labeled as streamers, some as balloons, some string lights, table clothes, disposable cups, paper plates, eating utensils, assorted snacks, first aid supplies—how unruly of a dance was this supposed to be?! The list went on and on. What really broke Hugo was the parcel labeled lava lamps. Goddamn lava lamps.

Are those necessary? Though he was no expert on parties (had Hugo ever been to a dance thrown by this school? No. A party thrown by his fellow students? No. A *dance* thrown by his peers? Nope), the quantities of supplies before him seemed excessive.

"How were you planning to move all this?" He dared ask.

"Out the front door." Briar answered.

As Hugo tried his best not to (metaphorically) bang his head against a wall and (literally) remove himself from this nightmare (by walking out the door and away from these bound-to-be-caught party throwers), a thought rudely interrupted his perfectly sound mind: *Varian's going to be so disappointed*. That made two of them. Setting aside all these partying bells and whistles that Hugo had cultivated no attachment to, his friend's poorly concealed (and oddly intense) enthusiasm for this dance was greatly infectious. If Varian attended, as it seemed he would, it couldn't be *that* bad, right?

And he'd asked Hugo to join him.

All in things considered, tonight would either be one of his roommate's last instances of pure ignorant bliss, before he moved on to the very last page of the notes (the only other place where the ugly truth could be, if not in these penultimate pages), or he desperately would need some cheering up. Either way, Hugo's conclusion didn't change: Varian was a rebel, an alchemist. If his hopes of an easy rebellion (or a rebellion at all) were soon to be squashed, then why not enjoy one last night

of revelry? That, in combination with other factors (some that he couldn't find a proper name for), spurred Hugo to a terrible state of determination.

And really, it wasn't like there was anything else he, alone, could do to soften the blow.

"Ashlynn's gonna kill me if we don't get all this out of here," Briar muttered, almost concerned but not at all. It wasn't a surprise to Hugo that two princesses were rooming together; Briar, the next Sleeping Beauty and Ashlynn, the next Cinderella. "Luckily, she's currently sulking in her shoe store right now. She won't be back for a while."

As she double checked the contents of each box, Cupid frowned. "If Apple's still being a jerk about her dating Hunter, I'll talk to her."

Still amazed at the audacity of this situation, Hugo coughed, as if losing access to air, interrupting and getting their attention: "Did none of you think to stagger the deliveries over the course of the week, so you'd have more time to bring them to—"

"Clause in the lease," Briar said. "We have the space for today, and today only."

"Okay," Hugo rubbed his face behind his glasses. "Since you clearly need it, I am willing to lend you my services."

Cupid beamed.

"Hold on," Hopper said, attempting not to stumble over his words. "Who said we needed your help? Briar's coordinated more parties at this school than you can count! All of them successfully undiscovered and—"

"Any of those parties off-campus?" Hugo asked, pointedly. "Any parties where you had to move all your supplies through the school and into Bookend, on a time crunch, right when Grimm, who's suspicious of you, is watching like a hawk?"

"He didn't seem easy to trick," Briar yawned. "He never has been."

"Oh yeah, great job there," sarcasm lined every word. "That lie, 'these are for a play we're putting on!' Terrible. Truly awful. One of the worst I've ever seen." Hugo laughed humorlessly. "The only reason you got away with that is because Grimm loves to turn a blind eye to royals."

Though her expression remained entirely unbothered, Briar paused. If this was a hit to her pride as a party planner, she gave no indication.

"If we're bound to get away with it," Hopper croaked, "why would we need to worry?"

"Cause he needs more evidence that it's a *True Hearts Day* thing. That's the real issue. If we go around transporting these supplies in plain sight, he'll put the pieces together and, oblivious as he is, figure out what's being planned." Hugo took a breath. "Listen. You're an expert on... parties and dances, I've been told." Briar looked ready to shut down his skepticism. Hugo continued. "I'm an expert on sneaking shit in and out of this ginormous old school," though he wouldn't be divulging *how* he got that information. "We both need this dance to go off without a hitch. So..." with only a little hesitance, he held out his hand.

The trio glanced between each other, forming a tight huddle, muttering and murmuring too quietly for him to hear. Hugo briefly pondered how successful his efforts would be if he had to work solo, from the shadows, keeping Grimm away from them *rather than* them away from Grimm. He could do it, but—

Then, the huddle broke.

“Welcome to the team.” Briar took his hand; hers was soft as a cloud. She’d never had to climb a wall, or sneak out to do a job, or prove a self-worth that never seemed to materialize. Of course not. Her destiny was never questioned to be hers. “Now, about those secret passages...”

Hugo tried to look enthused, rather than repulsed. *You’re doing this for Varian.*

The best, and only, option for getting everything to the dance location, and avoiding Grimm and the other faculty (Hugo was kind enough to discreetly check, finding them lurking near the conventional exits, trying not to seem like they were lurking) was to use the secret tunnels. Through them, Hugo and the true hearts trio could escape the school unseen, supplies in hand. So, that’s what they did.

At first, everything went smoother than Hugo could’ve possibly dreamed, thanks to his endless wealth of knowledge, of course. The closest wall-door to Cupid’s room was about a sixty seconds walk past the dorms. Every trip out of the room, he checked each turn before they moved ahead. Running a hand along the surface, he’d found what he was looking for by muscle memory, cracking open the wall-door.

One by one, all four students went inside, Hugo being last, shutting the makeshift-entrance behind them before shoving ahead of the trio. As he led the way, being the only one who actually knew where he was going, they walked and walked down all the rickety stairs, avoiding cobwebs, creepy crawlies, and other details that Hugo had long learned to tune out. Eventually, using a secret exit that led to one of the school’s many grassy lawns by (but in a blind spot from) the main entrance. Hugo almost suggested that one of them wait there, to make sure the coast was clear each time they used it. Almost.

After they dropped off the first round of packages, Cupid and the other two went back to the secret exit, intent on using the hidden stairs to go back up to the dorms. Unfortunately, the door being shut made for an unbroken surface once more. They stood in front of it, trying to find it, with no luck. To Hugo, it was obvious where the door was.

Was he being unfairly judgemental? Nah. Totally not.

From that point forward, he let Olivia sneak out beforehand to check that the coast was clear each time, the same as in the hallway entrance inside.

Rinse and repeat, over and over. It was a decent plan until it wasn’t.

For starters, stairs. So many stairs. Enough stairs to prompt the question: Was this school trying to break the record for most stairs ever? They went so far as to add secret tunnels, with even more! Secret! Stairs! All while trying to avoid lengthy exchanges, for every time he got into a back and forth his frustrations grew exponentially.

“How many people did you invite, again?” Hugo asked after a particularly unpleasant trip up the stairs.

Briar brushed off a cobweb from her shoulder. “Everyone I could find.”

Hugo raised an eyebrow, silently begged for a real estimate.

Briar seemed to mentally calculate. “Somewhere between a hundred and— ”

“A hundred?!”

“No! *Between* a hundred.”

“And?”

“A hundred and fifty.” The noise *alone* this party would create could get them and everyone in attendance caught, including Varian, if this party happened at all.

The biggest problem, by far, was the rate at which they were moving. With the amount of boxes, and their current pace, they wouldn’t get everything out on time. They needed support.

Hugo didn’t want Varian to know about all this, not wanting to worsen his apparent worries that the dance wouldn’t happen, so asking him wasn’t an option (no matter how greatly he wished his roommate were here, figuring this out alongside him).

A different, dangerous idea formed in his mind: Call in the cavalry. Varian’s friends. Hugo’s friends? Jury’s still out on that title. Either way, he immediately dismissed the idea of reaching out. The less people he had to make excuses to, the better. If he asked Varian’s friends for aid, they’d surely ask all kinds of questions about *why* he was so insistent on this matter. Would they buy that it was simply about the dance? No, definitely not worth that hassle. Not to mention that he wasn’t too keen on showing off the secret tunnels to so many people. If Donella asked him to do any jobs (she hadn’t since before Legacy Day, obviously, but if she *did*) he’d like to think they’d be empty of witnesses.

No, that idea wasn’t worth the trouble.

Anywho, isn’t it funny how a mind can change!

During round who-knows-how-many-by-then of transporting cargo, as Hugo and the trio returned to the princess’ dorm to gather supplies, Briar suddenly shoved to the front of the group, rushed to her bed, and collapsed without warning.

Frankly, his first thought was that she’d died. Then, an unmistakable snore. Sleeping. She was *sleeping?! Hugo* blinked in exacerbat

“Sleep attacks. She gets them from time to time,” Cupid explained to the baffled Hugo, absently wondering if this was a bookmark of being the next Sleeping Beauty. “She’ll be up again in a few minutes,” she paused. “Probably.”

“Probably?” Hugo nodded, processing.

“She’s just— it’s usually not—” Hopper, undecided on what to say, disappearing in a puff of magical smoke, flopping on to the floor as a frog

Okay, it's worth the trouble. Hugo took out his mirrorphone.

“Varian?”

With one hand, Rapunzel knocked on his door. In the other, she held a finished vest, the final piece of his dance attire, a gift she was insistent on making.

“I’m leaving your vest on the doorknob.”

No reply.

It was only once she was almost out of the sight that she heard a door open. Looking back, she watched as a hand took the vest and disappeared.

Annoyance aside, Rapunzel couldn’t stop herself from worrying. *He’s overworking himself.* She resolved to check on him sooner than later. Optimistically, the dance may snap him out of this state before it spiraled out of control.

She decided to head back to her own dorm, and take her time getting ready.

A familiar ding escaped her mirrorphone. Rapunzel read the text, scanning every reluctant word explaining the basics of the situation Hugo had gotten himself into, and his need for their support. Her smile grew wider, especially given the last part of the message.

Goggles is busy atm. Let’s not worry him with potentially falling apart dances, k?

Though Nuru immediately followed up this text with one about “blatant favoritism” Rapunzel headed to the future Sleeping Beauty’s room with a noticeable skip in her step, needing no further convincing. After all, she surely knew what was *actually* going on with Hugo. If only Varian could look past his nerves and see the same.

“Just so we’re clear, I haven’t forgotten your trick with these tunnels during Finders Keepers.”

“Is that right, Pauper?” Behind Hugo, a symphony of steps echoed. “What? You’re gonna say it was cheating?”

“No! In fact, I’d call it resourceful,” Eugene concluded, “and I’m not the least bit bitter I didn’t know this existed beforehand.”

Lance laughed. “Knowing about this *definitely* would’ve been handy in years past.”

“Speak for yourself,” Cassandra said. “I didn’t need cheap tricks to win.”

“Neither of us did,” Nuru, stars in her eyes, stated. “And! It was my first time in the game. So…”

Everyone from the friend group (except Varian) showed up, and, to their credit, like a well oiled machine they didn’t drop anything, they waited till the coast was clear, they listened. They set up a functioning system where the “True Hearts Trio” as Rapunzel was calling them, would run items

from the secret exit outside to the dance's location, while everyone else brought items down to them through the secret tunnels.

At this team's new pace, they'd be done before sunset.

Granted, Hugo wasn't thrilled about showing off these escape routes to so many people, but given the circumstances (and the uncircumventable motivation he carried today) he had conceded that they were trustworthy enough. One would think he'd be utterly thankful, grateful, impressed even, but he wasn't. One complaint overshadowed their helpfulness: The conversations. Oh god, the conversations.

"So," Rapunzel's voice drifted, as she, Hugo, and their friends were walking down the stairs of the secret tunnel. "What's Varian so focused that he needs to be left alone?"

"Let me guess," Lance interrupted. "The *thing*?"

"As in," Nuru lowered her voice, "the borderline illegal thing that his mother left to him before disappearing to who knows where?"

It wasn't easy to hide his startled state. Sometimes Hugo forgot that Varian told his friends about the notes, under the condition they keep all information in strict confidentiality. The wannabe Sorcerer's Apprentice gave the same promise. Not that he kept it.

"Understandable," Eugene sighed. "The suspense is killing me. He's been picking apart those scraps of paper since Legacy Day! When are we gonna see some results?"

"I don't see *you* offering to lend a hand, Pauper," Hugo shot back.

"I did!" Eugene's confidence faltered. "At first..."

The others voiced similar sentiments. "It's not our fault he's so protective of it all," Nuru suggested.

"Or that we aren't all fans of puzzles," Lance pointed out.

"Or good at them," Cass said pointedly, not referring to herself. Totally coincidentally, Eugene made an indigent noise.

"Nor is it our fault that Varian, by a wide margin, prefers to work with you," Rapunzel directed her words at Hugo, her tone bordered on teasing (as teasing as the near-eternally cheery princess could be). Hugo didn't dignify that comment with a response, no matter how smug (and slightly bashful; huh) the grin it gave him was.

"It's important stuff," Nuru, the only other royal present other than Hugo, noted, saving him from any more confusing comments. Noticing what must have been relief on his face, she sneered, giving him a light shove that he took in stride. "Hugo's involvement, shockingly, doesn't diminish that."

Time with Nuru was the easiest of the bunch, despite (totally genuine) dislike of him, and thanks in part to her status as a royal (by school standards, not literal royalty; all the better for Hugo). Rarely, if ever, did they discuss the royal/rebel goings-ons around them. Though he constantly assisted with the notes, Hugo was no stranger to allowing himself to forget their implications whenever he could.

Goodness, wasn't that kind of what he was doing here? Perhaps that expectation was why he was a great deal unprepared (though not surprise) when she conspiratorially murmured to him:

"Imagine how much sweeter our destinies will feel when people we care about aren't getting the short end of the stick."

Hugo brushed away another cobweb from their path, fixing his hold on the boxes in his hands. No matter how many he got rid of, they always seemed to return with otherworldly speed. It was true for previous jobs he'd used the tunnels for, and it was true now. *Spiders down here must be weaving overtime.* Doing everything he could to avoid thinking...

What would these rebel friends' reactions be to the truth? If Varian told them at all, would they accept that the risk was too great to their friend, refusing to put him in the line of fire? Or, would they double down? Would they pressure him to depower the Storybook, and deal with the fallout later? *If* they could deal with the fallout?

Would they be right to?

Much to his relief, the conversation steered clear of the notes from there. In his mind, he tried to do the same.

Funnily enough, none of them asked *why* he was helping with the dance.

Unfortunately, the extra hands did not solve the conundrum of the infinite stairs. Go figure.

Exhaustion set in remarkably quick, as did the dread. Sitting at the top of the secret steps once more, surrounded by these friends who he still couldn't comfortably call his own, Hugo grew more and more sure that one or more of them would suggest involving Varian. Frankly, it was surprising none of them had done so already. Instead, Rapunzel had dragged them all back to Briar's room. There, she checked practically every box left there, the majority of them smaller than the ones they'd already taken out, weighed them in her hands, and announced, "I have a better idea."

Now, as Rapunzel finished wrapping the latest package, itself covered in sticky compound thanks to his glove, with the ends of her long hair, Hugo checked out the window. Seeing only those who were in on the plan standing far below, this time Cupid and Briar (the others had already gone ahead), he gave Rapunzel a thumbs up. Without further delay, she began lowering her air out the window, slow and steady, lowering the latest round of supplies down to them.

It was a good plan, and the others, currently running supplies from the school to the party location, had readily agreed to it. At first, Hugo had stayed behind to help Rapunzel should anyone notice this system from outside and ask questions. Luckily, the school was vast and the air was cold, so people generally weren't wandering the side of the school, let alone faculty. Better yet, this plan was physically easier for almost everyone. The only hiccup was how easily the boxes slipped out of her hair, no matter how tight she knotted them. That was a problem Hugo's intellect could solve!

"I don't know why I didn't think of this sooner," Hugo loaded the next vial of anti-sticky compound into his glove. Like clockwork, he'd add the actual sticky compound to the package, then when the box landed on the ground, he'd sprinkle down an anti-sticky compound. Just a speck was needed to free her hair, so the heights weren't really an obstacle (unless you counted how Hugo's fear of heights left him queasy with each look down).

“I did,” Rapunzel offered.

The pair below freed the package. Once again, his method succeeded. “Then, why didn’t you say so earlier?” He asked, giving her another thumbs up.

“Most of the boxes were way too heavy to try this with. My hair isn’t exactly made of steel! Now that only the lighter stuff remains, it’ll actually make things go smoother,” as she spoke, she dragged her hair back up, free of any baggage. Despite her insistence that her hair could handle the strain, the next box looked quite heavy.

“Doesn’t that hurt?” He asked without thinking.

Rapunzel shrugged. “Well, it’s not as heavy as an adult woman will be, so I can’t complain.”

Hugo flinched, an action that didn’t seem appropriate. Misfortunate in exchange for a Happily Ever After, that was the deal. There wasn’t much choice in the matter, but Rapunzel was far from the worst off as far as destinies went. Why be concerned?

If it were any other princess or prince saying anything like that, complaining about their future low points that they *knew* wouldn’t last forever, Hugo might’ve rolled his eyes. Not this time. Of the rebels Hugo knew in his day to day life, Rapunzel was one of the most tolerable. Consequently, he hoped her misfortune would be limited.

“Do you *know* how long you’ll be...” imprisoned. No good way to phrase it honestly.

As if a lit candle deprived of oxygen, Rapunzel visibly dimmed. *She doesn’t*. Some stories were vague enough that they could play out over the course of days, weeks, months, sometimes years. That was up to the Storybook.

His own destiny was more consistent. According to Cyrus (Donella was busy the day he’d asked), no Sorcerer’s Apprentice ever had their big blunder last longer than a day. Frankly, that was part of the appeal. Unlike he’d done with his destiny, Hugo could not easily dismissable this future misfortune brought down upon Rapunzel.

Regardless of his desperation for his own destiny, Hugo couldn’t help but extend a portion of his sympathies to her, though with a touch less intensity than he’d invested in Varian. Funnily enough, the two rebels had the opposite gripes with their stories. One story of imprisonment that would eventually end, and one story of exploring that ended in (essentially) imprisonment. Either way, he wouldn’t be sneaking supplies out of a building, or attending a dance, with them once their stories hit those marks.

“I’m sorry,” Hugo allowed himself to say, as if he could’ve stopped the words.

“Don’t be,” Rapunzel smiled, her demeanor startlingly sunny. “We’re trying to do something about it. Mostly you and Varian, right?” She laughed.

What we can, anyway. Hugo didn’t flinch that time, already growing numb to the terror of what was coming. The truth of the situation, the lack of clean breaks and good options, free of grim consequences.

From out the window, a whistle caught the blonds attention. This time, Eugene and Cassandra, ready for the next of the supplies.

“So, you’re going to the dance?” Rapunzel asked, already wrapping it in her hair.

Hugo decided not to push the previous subject any further. “Goggles asked me to go, so I might.”
Translation: Of course he was.

“Noted.”

Hugo didn’t need to see her to know she was smiling, though *why* she was so pleased was a mystery.

Finally left with the last two boxes of party supplies, Hugo and Rapunzel decided to join the others at the dance’s location, Bookend Village. Since Briar was the last to come back to the school to move supplies out, she walked with them.

“Thanks for lending a hand,” she yawned, hands empty as the blonds carried this last delivery.
“You and the rest of ‘em.”

“Don’t mention it,” Hugo deadpanned, as Rapunzel offered a far more genuine response. Unfortunately, this contrast spurred Briar’s curiosity.

“You don’t go to many parties, do you?” she asked, less judgemental than he expected.

“What makes you say that?”

“I’ve never seen you at any of mine, and I do throw most of them. Plus, I’ve definitely *never* seen you assist in organizing one.”

“Which isn’t a bad thing,” Rapunzel merifully interjected.

Briar shrugged, unconvinced and unafraid to wear it on her face. “It got me thinking. What changed?”

If her completely unwelcome interrogation wasn’t bad enough, Hugo couldn’t ignore how intently Rapunzel was staring at him, as if waiting for some mysterious other shoe to drop.

Well, Hugo wasn’t one to play along with the delusional, much less the filthy rich and gleefully royal. He grinned, putting on an air of casual confidence. “I’m destined to reach beyond what’s expected of me, for better or worse. I’m simply acting how I should.”

If his answer caused Rapunzel’s anticipation to deflate, Hugo didn’t notice. Nor did he notice how *still* unbothered Briar was with his vague, unsatisfying response. Or perhaps for her, a die-hard royal with one of the best destinies, that logic did make sense. There were better sights to focus on as they finally arrived at the party’s location.

“**The Red Shoes Reception Hall**” read the sign swinging by the velvet awning hanging below a giant pair of red heels. Along the building were dead vines, early victims of the coming winter. The structure was without any real flair. Hugo had walked past the establishment countless times before, but he’d never actually been inside. Frankly, he felt no need to do so, even now. His greatest motivation to attend the dance wasn’t there yet. Assumably, he still in their dorm working on—

The doors to the reception hall burst open, new and old friends flooding out, boxes in hand. The blonds ran to them, dread pooling in Hugo's gut. What was all this about?

"We'll want our deposit back," Cupid, the last one out the door, demanded in the face of the hall's owner, an older woman looking entirely unhappy.

"Gladly!" She pointed in the winged-student's face. "I'd never have agreed to lend you my space if I knew you'd be using it for this dangerous celebration!" Next to the woman, the reception staff continued shoving boxes out, as Hugo and the others grabbed what they could. "Consider yourselves lucky I'm not calling your Headmaster!" With a mighty swing, the owner slammed the doors shut.

As the others began organizing the mismanaged supplies, Briar, presumably as close as she could look to the emotion known as NOT unbothered, took out her mirrorphone. "We are not moving all this, on our own, again," she tapped her heel shoe on the ground, waiting. Then, ear to the screen, she relaxed. "Ashlynn! Are you still in Bookend?"

Animal labor. Ethical? Probably not, but they listened to Ashlynn Ella, dressed in pastel pinks and blues and crystal glass pumps with delicate vine-like designs, like she personally hung the sun and moon in the sky.

The future Cinderella led this vast collection of creatures, the Trio Hearts Trio, Varian's friends, and Hugo (all of them carrying various boxes of party supplies) into her shoe store, actually named *The Glass Slipper*.

Fittingly, given the name, the front doors were made of glass, held in place by swirling silver metal. The windows, numerous and lining the walls, were the style. The framing of the surfaces were smooth stone, slightly pink, and covered in vines with a few brushes lining the property. There were still some flowers, though their buds had closed. Even the plants, unaffected by the increasingly cold air, seemed a little greener. On the left side of the building, two towers, one with a domed top and the other with a balcony-like top, occupied each corner. The root of the one tower, and the larger roof of the main structure, were blue, metal, and glass.

Inside was somehow more pristine. Everything soft and clean, with a place to sit always an arm's length away, whether it be plush couches or velvet chairs, all pastel. Everything matched the many shelves/displays of shoes, lit by the fading light of the day through the windows.

This was quite literally the nicest store Hugo had ever seen. If he didn't already, now he felt sick.

At the moment, the store was closed early for her friends' sake. Less prying eyes to ask about the party supplies they brought with them. Everyone scattered around, some holding a glass of lemonade (Ashlynn offered it once they got settled, because of *course* a rich kid who owned a goddamn shoe shop had fresh lemonade ready to go). All except Briar, asleep again, slouched on one of the couches. Unphased, Ashlynn threw a blanket over her.

"Where will you hold the dance now?" the strawberry blonde, glass slipper-wearing student asked no one in particular.

No one offered an answer, because no one *had* an answer.

“They won’t,” Hugo said, sure everyone else was thinking the same. It was the only reasonable conclusion. He should’ve known from the start.

“That’s not true,” Cupid was the first to say.

The others echoed her sentiments. One by one, they threw out dumb idea after dumb idea, all being shot down, either for their risk of school administrators seeing/hearing the party, or a vendor/host who likely wouldn’t take them in on such short notice. The longer the debate stretched on, with no solution in sight, the more desperate the suggestions sounded from everyone; everyone except Ashlynn, the one conscious royal, her expression clouded.

How inconsequential must all this be to her? For Hugo, this was a sickly green feeling, one he’d lived with most of his life. The deep understanding that there were those in his immediate vicinity, almost all the time, who didn’t have to fight for what they wanted; they only had to sit and watch as others tried in vain. Royals. Royalty.

“There’s got to be a way,” Rapunzel urged the others to keep brainstorming, stumbling over Hugo’s thoughts. Cause it was also true that some royalty didn’t want their destiny. Yet a parallel applied to them: they believed they had to fight for the life they wanted, only they *couldn’t*. Not without someone getting hurt.

“What if we have two parties? One could be a decoy? Give the other time to have fun?”

“And who would want to attend a doomed decoy?!”

The sickly green stuck, now worse than ever before, because now Hugo’s mind turned once more to Varian, his dear roommate, and how hard he was fighting not merely to have the life *he* wanted, but to allow others to reach for their own uncharted futures.

And Hugo could only sit back and watch.

Hugo still had a *chance* at his destiny. Granted, he’d never been closer to losing it, but there was a chance. Varian would never have the carefree life he hoped for. An enemy of present and future royals, like Ashlynn Ella and Briar Beauty, or remain the latest in a long line of Dorothy’s.

This was the wake up call I needed.

Hugo knew this dance was a distraction; a bandaid on a bullet wound. The last shred of stability and control the wannabe Sorcerer’s Apprentice could exert. Hugo couldn’t change that Varian signed the Storybook of Legends. He couldn’t change that the Storybook was an all or nothing deal. He couldn’t change his bad standing with Don. He couldn’t even stop a dance from being shut down; unable to fight the constraints of archaic school rules and general societal stupidity. Really though, Hugo’s been the stupid one. Placing all his hopes here, as if this event alone could keep Varian from losing that quintessential spark tied to his steadfast hope; the spark Hugo saw on full display through his doomed passion for alchemy, science, magic, his friends, his loved ones, and simple made-up games like Finders Keepers. Once upon a time, a voice in Hugo’s head, familiar but not his own, had called it a pointless endeavor. In this moment, that voice returned in full force. Was this dance worse than a distraction? Was it pointless?

An ‘ahem’, light like a ticking clock, caught his, and everyone’s, attention.

“How about here?” Ashlyn offered.

“Here?” Briar awoke, yawning. “But this store can’t accommodate—”

“Yes, the *store*,” she dragged out the word, as if last-minute debating a choice. Then, deciding. “Not the basement.”

“Basement?” Hugo raised an eyebrow.

“Basement,” she reiterated, like she genuinely thought he didn’t hear her.

Then, Ashlynn backed up to an unassuming part of the wall, tapping a few spots, letting it swing open like a door.

Sleepy no more, Briar was the first to charge at it. Whatever she found inside made her gasp. “How come you never mentioned you had a basement?!”

“I’ll explain, I promise,” Ashlynn ushered the others to take a look. Most of them were already out of their seats.

Hugo, however, remained where he was.

Needless to say, he wasn’t eager to work with yet another royal, nor was he completely won over by this act of generosity. Briar’s involvement was a different story: a partier who didn’t care for the societal implications, for they didn’t affect her one bit. Ashlynn didn’t seem the party type, so why was she so willing to make *her* store the scene of the crime? None of it sat right with Hugo. Was this a trap? Off school property or not, that wouldn’t stop Grimm from dishing out demerits, or worse, if anyone snitched about this. It wouldn’t be feasible to prevent anyone from telling Grimm, but if Hugo wanted to lessen the risk...

Once more, the voice calling this dance pointless reared its ugly head, same as it did with Finders Keepers. But now, in the clear air of a possible path forward, a memory overshadowed its volume: Varian’s smile, in the company of all his friends in their shared dorm room, drinking cocoa, unconcerned with the loss. That wasn’t pointless. This dance wasn’t pointless either, right?

“You coming?” Nuru, of all people, asked him, not looking eager per say, but mildly curious about his stunned state.

“You all go ahead,” Hugo patted the bag hanging from his shoulder, his metal glove still inside. He needed to make himself useful. “I’ve got an errand to run.”

About an hour after returning to the school, everyone in their friend group was ready to go, save for two. In the hallway outside their roommates’ dorm, Rapunzel (fiddling with a small felt-fabric bag in her hands) and the others were waiting for Varian, and presumably Hugo, to finish getting ready.

Hugo himself didn’t seem to be present though. She was quite sure she’d have heard him bantering with his roommate if he *were* in the dorm, but she didn’t. All she heard were hums from Varian, which was troubling. Did something happen in the time since she’d dropped off his vest? She glanced at her boyfriend, silently conveying her concern. That was enough to compel him to act.

“Vee,” Eugene called out. “Are you okay in there?”

“Yep!” Varian shouted back, a tad too forcefully.

“Stop worrying about looking perfect,” Lance offered. “Apparently Farrah — you know her? She’s nice — she’s gonna be there helping people out if their outfits—”

The door opened. “Yeah, yeah I saw the text.”

Varian, coat covering the attire she already well-knew the components of, looked perfectly cheery, save for one dead give away. Though the glittery makeup and eyeshadow did its best to hide this fact, it was obvious to this old friend:

Varian had been crying.

Rapunzel was on him immediately. “Everything okay?”

Varian nodded, and in an instant she knew he wouldn’t offer more than that, at least not right then.

“Okay,” She would wait until he wanted to talk, if he did.

In the meantime, she had one last thing to do. She shuffled past her friend and stormed into his room. Without explanation, she left a small bag on his roommate’s bed, along with a folded sheet of paper.

“What’s that for?” Varian asked as his friend emerged from the room, as the others moved on ahead leaving Rapunzel and Varian to trail behind.

“Well, I gave you some attire for the dance, didn’t I?” She smiled. “Hugo deserves a little something too. He’s gonna meet us there, right?”

Varian blinked at her, looking more surprised than he probably should have, given how perceptive his long-haired friend had always been. “I presume so... How’d you know I asked him?”

The obvious answer would, of course, be that Hugo practically took over the party-supplies delivering for the dance, dragging everyone but Varian into those efforts. After all that work, if the invitation from his roommate wasn’t enough, he’d definitely want to see the results. But that was for her to know. Why spoil the surprise for Varian?

“A hunch.”

“You’re not gonna rat me out, right, Olivia?”

The robotic mouse shook her head.

“Good. Just checking,” Hugo said, fixing his glasses, unable to suppress a smirk. He might’ve gone a bit overboard with this plan.

For the past hour, he’d been covertly sealing off every potential exit from Headmaster Grimm’s office, beginning with the main door, then (as unseen as he could be from outside) dealing with the window. Using a solution made from his metal glove, Hugo encased the locks and cracks in an almost imperceptible layer of glitter, ready to explode into unmovable crystals (of his own creation) at the next sign of movement. If his calculations were correct, this would only encase the doors and windows.

Hurray for property damage!

There was no preventing the Headmaster from being suspicious that there was a True Hearts Day celebration happening. Nor was there a feasible way to prevent any party pooper from approaching him to rat out the dance's new location (currently being relayed to the guests by Briar and her infinite contact list). Today was the holiday, and he'd seen some of the party supplies (he would've seen *more* if Hugo didn't expend his energy and expertise keeping everything hidden, but whatever). Grimm may well go searching for someone to squeal on the party, or go searching for the party itself. Consequently, Hugo sought to block all potential problems in one fell swoop.

Thus came the moment of truth. The office door's handle moved, no doubt the Headmaster trying to leave his office...

BOOM! Crystals galore!

"What the—!" An old, muffled, irritating voice exclaimed.

Of course, the Headmaster *could* call for other faculty to assist, but by this time of day, on a Friday? Most of them would be gone.

"What do you think Liv? Too far?" Hugo whispered to his robotic mouse, who shook her head, scampering into his pocket once more. "I didn't think so either." Finally standing up from his hiding spot, he settled into a saunter as he left the crime scene.

Or, he would have.

He should've looked at the time. He should have remembered what one-on-one meeting happens at the end of every week, right around this time. He should have remembered *who* attended this meeting. He should have, but he didn't.

Donella, the Storybook death-gripped under her arm, took one look at the Grimm's office door and turned to walk away, no doubt electing not to get involved in this alchemical annoyance blocking her path to a meeting she didn't enjoy. A small mercy. Hugo should have been relieved.

Then, her familiar eyes found Hugo, too stunned to hide.

He didn't muster a word. Not a single word. He couldn't be the first, not after he'd been blundering, doubting, failing her.

He shouldn't have called her, she'd been so busy, busy enough to completely cut contact for the time being. She must've seen his call, though he hung up before she had the chance to answer. She had something to say to him, he knew it. Once she did, could he ask his questions then? Could he beg to find out what would happen to Varian if he tried to undo the Storybook's power? As if he needed to ask, as if the answer wouldn't be horrid. As if he wasn't on the thinnest ice of his life, with the slightest misstep ready to drop him into the raging waters below. All this and more flooded his heart as he waited on the only guardian he'd ever known. The only person he'd ever truly fought for, strived to please, sought to be good enough to deserve to stand near, safe and secure for the rest of his days. He stared at her and she stared back.

Then, the Sorcerer walked past him, not a word wasted, like she hadn't stopped at all.

Like she was done with him.

Not busy, not disappointed but offering another chance. Just... done.

And Hugo... made himself scarce.

Chapter End Notes

Of all the arcs to end up being a three parter, I never imagined it would be True Hearts Day. However, the voices have demanded it, and I am their vessel for creating drama-filled niche au crossover fanfiction for strangers on the internet, so a three parter it must be.

Okay seriously, after much deliberation, I couldn't put the dance itself in the same chapter as the middle chunk of the arc. It would've been the LONGEST chapter of the entire fic and while I know SOME of you wouldn't mind that, pacing is important. Y'all aren't ready for the dance. You won't believe what's been cooked. You can't fathom what's in the pot >:)

ANYWHO, thank you all for reading! I hope you enjoyed watching me shove Hugo into a microwave and letting him explode like a marshmallow peep.

Please remember to take your meds on time, be mindful of your sleep schedule, and DRINK SOME WATER.

True Hearts Day Part 3

Chapter Summary

Varian and Hugo, both burdened with knowledge they believe the other is unaware of, regarding more than just matters of the heart, try to make the most of the secret True Hearts Day Dance.

Chapter Notes

HEHEHEHEHEHEHEHEHEHE

Y'all. This chapter. Oh this chapter. :) You'll see.

This three parter is definitely my "this is my fic and I decide what canon plots could be better" moment. True Hearts Day in EAH did not slay as hard as it could have. I've sought to remedy that (with help from my dear friend Nart).

Speaking of, SHOUTOUT AND THANK YOU TO MY FRIEND NART (nart-is-a-monster)!! The gratitude I feel for his contributions (no spoilers) cannot be overstated.

Since this chapter is about a dance, and dances tend to include music, I'll share some inside info with you. And by inside info, I mean A SONG! For the scene starting with: "Surrounded by the sounds of..." the song I pictured was "Love Is A Game" by Adele.

Hope you all enjoy the new chapter!! See you on the other side!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

True Hearts Day, for the most part, had already been a good day for Varian. He'd gotten some good clothes from Rapunzel, actually managed to invite Hugo to the secret dance (as a friend), and had a breakthrough with his work on Ulla's encrypted Storybook research notes.

On a good day, Varian could recognize his vices' warning signs. He knew what a spiral looked like; knew how it felt. Whether it be burnout, overthinking, or self-isolation, he could usually tell when such things were happening. On a good day, he could successfully combat these elements early on, making sure nothing got out of hand. He knew this because there'd been more and more of those recently: good days.

There would've been less if he roomed alone this year, as he originally intended. His usual tendency to spiral was doubly likely this first semester, with all his fears of Legacy Day, (before that went to shit) sticking to him like cold on ice. It helped to have people around who could see the signs when he couldn't, but, knowing his friends were dealing with similar terror, arguably more

justified by their more intense fates, Varian had decided to keep his strife to himself, as best he could.

So, rooming alone. That didn't happen. Over and over, he found those fears bubbling to the surface in dangerous proximity to a roommate struggling in every way the future Dorothy wasn't. One longing to escape his destiny, one desperate to secure his own, believing it wasn't his at all. Despite the chasm-wide difference in problems, they found a way to comfort each other. Eventually. But hey! They got there!

Varian vividly remembered the words he offered Hugo, late that fateful night in the Cooking Classic lab, assuring him the Storybook would accept him whether he was related to the Sorcerer or not.

"Magic will know the truth. Simple as that."

For all the grief the Storybook of Legends brought him, Varian always assumed its magic was just that: simple (albeit unfathomably powerful).

That was before he read any of his mother's research.

So many of her entries seemed to go nowhere. Not that it bothered Varian. That was the nature of the scientific process. Not everything seems important, or helpful, but it all must be recorded. From the changing details over generations, to the recurring secret survival of one witch (of the two) in his own story, to the bookmarks and curses, these details intrigued him. All of it in service of the main goal: finding a way to depower the Storybook and let people truly *choose* their own path or their destiny (that last bit was more a Varian hope than anything else), all without risking anyone.

As the number of unsolved pages had decreased, Varian's hopes inversely increased.

Leading to today. True Hearts Day, most of which he spent throwing himself into these penultimate pages, implementing this latest tapestry-style cipher idea.

It was the right code.

Of course, part of this dedication served as a means of ignoring the nervous jitters he'd acquired after successfully asking his roommate to join him at that night's secret True Heart's Day dance, where he now walked with his friends (aside from Hugo, who he assumed would be meeting them there). Not that it distracted him for long.

Varian decoded next-to-last pages hours ago. He'd seen what they held, read them again and again, again and again, again and *again*, until driven to tears.

Those findings... he wouldn't think of them. He couldn't think of them. He *couldn't bear to*. Not necessarily because of the findings themselves, but because of the implications. The what-ifs. The *"What would've happened if..."*

In that same loop of noise, a thought, sharp and clear, continued to rattle through Varian:

I need to tell Hugo.

But he hadn't seen him since he left their room, right when he got started on the notes. In some ways, that was a blessing. Varian wasn't sure what he'd say.

So, yeah, he was spiraling.

As previously stated, Varian knew what a spiral looked like; knew how it felt. The only problem? Though conscious of its pull, he couldn't always pull himself from it this time.

Enter stage right: the friends who knew him well.

"You're quiet." Eugene stepped in front of his friend, walking backwards, not keen on standing around. The faster they got the dance, the less likely they were to be caught and questioned by any school administrators.

"Sometimes I'm just quiet." Varian tugged at the sleeves of his coat, which hid his dance attire. It was winter and the night made that hard to ignore.

"Yeah," Eugene conceded a little. "But this isn't comfy-quiet, it's more like I'm-trying-not-to-cry quiet."

"You also haven't blinked in at least three minutes," Nuru said, eyes sparkling, almost dazzling. "I didn't want to interrupt. My record for self-staring contests is six."

"Sometimes I forget what a nerd you are, Nuru," Lance managed to sound dry and amused at the same time.

"That's *your* mistake," Nuru preened.

With this little exchange, Varian managed to smile. Though it did help not to be in the hot seat anymore.

"You know, I could've sworn we were interrogating someone else," Cassandra fanned the flames.

Nevermind.

"Enough of that," Rapunzel, ever the savior, stopped the group in their tracks. "We have more important things to worry about. Like," she turned to the building behind her, "Holiday celebrations! We're here!"

Here? They'd stopped at the semi-familiar future-Cinderella-owned shoe store. *This isn't our stop.* Last he checked, the party was farther into town.

"There was a last minute change in plans," Eugene said without prompting. He must've looked dumbfounded. He probably still did. "Why else would Farrah be helping with outfits tonight?"

"Was anyone gonna mention that?" Varian blabbered, taking out his mirrorphone. It was entirely possible someone *did* "mention that." He really hadn't been paying attention, blindly following his friends while he battled his dissociative state. Sure enough, checking his mirrorphone, there awaited a text from Briar Beauty, collector of all numbers, alerting people of the change in location.

As far as he could recall, she did *not* have Hugo's number.

"Did anyone tell Hugo about this yet?" Varian asked, already texting. He didn't look at his friends as he did so, but if he had he would've been met with a round of smug, silent looks.

That was a lie. He absolutely saw those smug, silent looks. But he didn't become flustered. Not one iota.

That was also a lie.

When Donella first adopted Hugo, she didn't make a spectacle of it. That was only logical, given how unorthodox a destined successor he was. She kept him out of sight, working, training, earning his keep and his future.

When she did bring him along for a few select occasions and events, amongst the royals she couldn't stand (but sometimes couldn't escape an invitation from), people asked who he was. They'd never seen him before, so the query was natural.

In response, Donella, a little less silvery but no less imposing than she was now, said:

"He's my son. Didn't you know I had a son?"

And the frankness of her voice either embarrassed any skeptics into believing her or scared away from follow-up questions. Perhaps both. The private life she led, in part to shield her illegal activities from prying eyes, made her story plausible enough.

Hugo hadn't thought of that memory in years, mostly because when he did it forced him to consider the inverse of that situation. Being cut out.

Abstractly, he'd always imagined (in a limited way) some big talk with Donella spelling out in every way possible that he'd tried her patience, her trust, for the last time. He'd imagined this ending with him expelled from school. After all, if he didn't have a destiny, why keep him there? That was how he imagined it then. But that was then, this was now.

Now, as he trudged mechanically back to his dorm, in the wake of his first real encounter with the Sorcerer since his bookmark-like curse (not a bookmark) appeared during her lecture some weeks ago, it was all he could think of. This was because, for the first time, he truly allowed himself to think through *how* she would drop him from his destiny, if she chose to do so. Thinking it over, the answer was obvious.

In all likelihood, she would let him finish out the year, ignoring him like she did minutes ago. Like she'd been doing all this time. If the administration unpaused the signing of the Storybook of Legends, she could get him to exclude Hugo from the signing. Grimm already knew Hugo was adopted; the old bastard would be relieved. It would be easy. If anyone else noticed, confused as to why her "son" wasn't signing, she could simply say:

"He's not my son. Didn't you know he wasn't my son? If you must know, I took pity on him all those years ago, brought him into my care, enrolled him in this prestigious school, in spite of having no destiny of his own, lying in order to do so. I raised him as if my own. Of course, he couldn't inherit my destiny, but he knew that as well as I did. Regardless, my work is done. From here on out, he'll be fine without me."

Donella was never going to outright tell him when that happened. There was too much risk of an outburst, a biteback; useless as he was now, Hugo knew so much of her undisclosed operations. Maybe then she'd speak to him, blackmail him into silence, but other than that?

Where once this recently enforced distance from the Sorcerer felt temporary, a fallen domino of failure but surely not the last in the line, it didn't feel that way anymore.

The last chance to remain in her good graces already happened. He missed it. He'd never be the Sorcerer's Apprentice.

All of this loomed over Hugo, having reached his head but not yet his heart, persisting as he returned to his shared dorm. The space was empty, save for Ruddiger lazily throwing around a yarn ball. Olivia, jumping from his coat pocket, attempted to steal said ball, stirring the raccoon to steal it back, and so on and so forth. In any case, that wasn't the paper Hugo concerned himself with. Or, rather, the *lack* of paper he concerned himself with. His roommate's desk was clean of all its notes. The findings from the penultimate pages were nowhere to be seen.

Two questions announced themselves in his brain, forcing him to sit on his bed.

Did Varian complete them? Did they say what I thought they would?

A third, laying him down flat.

Does it matter?

Whether the knowledge Donella imparted upon him was in those pages, or the very last page, Hugo knew what was coming. She told him as much only a week after Legacy Day.

"Either the Storybook is capable of being de-powered, and no one gets a story, or it stays as it is. There is no middle ground. You'll see."

Shutting his eyes tight, Hugo tried to box it all away. He tried.

The faintest rustle of the blanket, a pitter patter of mechanical paws, and suddenly Olivia was by his head. Hugo opened one eye, finding her wrestling with an unfamiliar sight, one he hadn't noticed before. An ornate, green knitted bag on his bed with a note atop.

Gently, he plucked Olivia off it, reading:

This is for you! :D See you at the dance! (Varian's looking forward to seeing you there)

- Rapunzel

Opening the bag, he found two twin pieces of string inside. Holding them high, he saw they weren't string but chains, smooth and a touch shinier than his hair, with two bright pink hearts nestled in each. Glasses decor.

At the same time, his mirrorphone dinged several times, rapid fire. Hugo scrambled to find it in his jacket pocket, a bubble of light forming in his mind as he saw the sender.

Goggles

Still alive? I'm headed into the dance rn with the others! What's your estimated time of arrival?

Do you need the address? Apparently it changed last minute so that's concerning

Do you want me to meet you outside? Or do you wanna text me when you get here?

too many texts that doesn't sound desperate right

u8IGNORE that! Text to speech totally garbled my words. I didn't say any of that

Now, Hugo had two options.

1.

He *could* find and read whatever Varian managed to decode while he was gone, scouring for information he already knew, remaining prepared Donella asked for a report. As if she hadn't cut him off. As if he'd ever been that lucky.

No. To consider such a thing was to prolonge his torture.

Or...

2.

Honestly, Hugo had no idea what the dress protocol was for a party with his peers, much less a secret True Hearts Day dance. Whatever people's "true heart's" told them to wear? Was that the vibe?

In any case, Hugo knew how to dress inconspicuously-but-nice (as underwhelming as it felt). Had this been a less covert dance, he'd have dressed in his absolute finest. However, on the off chance he was interrogated by the wrong person, he knew better than to *look* like he was on his way to a secret True Hearts Day dance. So, not spending an exorbitant amount of time getting ready, he threw on a clean, fresh look, like he would wear for a presentation day in class. Corset and greenery, that's all. Well, that, and some soft pink eyeshadow and lip gloss. And these glasses decorations.

Leaving his bag (and the metal glove inside) behind, Hugo threw back on his coat, Olivia scurrying back into her pocket, and headed out.

Option 2 was definitely preferable. Though, whether it was the right choice was debatable.

Sitting around waiting for the wave of reality to crash into him at full force wasn't something Hugo wanted to do, but it was the smarter idea. It was coming either way, like pressure behind his eyes, despite his best efforts to ignore it. He had enough sense to worry about the state he was in, and the forethought to decide, quietly, that if he couldn't keep himself together, he would leave. Again, it might've been better if he didn't attend the dance at all. Keep the incoming breakdown to himself.

But he couldn't do that. All logic and reason went out the window in the face of one overwhelming factor in this equation.

He wanted to see his friend.

Students in the dark, huddled in their coats, whispering excitedly, all headed into the village of Bookend for the same reason. Like a fish in a running river, Hugo followed the flow. Not that he needed to; moreso to make sure anyone he ran into didn't forget the importance of discretion and

need someone to cover for them. He hadn't spent all day making sure this very secret, very not-allowed taboo-holiday dance didn't get caught and shut down for a couple of party-hyper idiots to ruin his work. Thankfully, they seemed to get the idea.

From the outside of the Glass Slipper Shoe Store, he almost couldn't believe there was a dance going on. Through the front doors of glass and metal, with a closed sign hanging from one handle, the building appeared empty. As far as he could see, anyway. There were no lights on.

The eeriest sense of *deja vu* flooded his mind, calling forth memories of thefts and odd jobs Don had asked of him, often starting in a place like this, where no one was supposed to be, not even Hugo.

That was how it's supposed to look, right?

Swallowing the apprehension, he continued following the strangers, fellow students but unknown to him, who seemed to know something he didn't, as they circled around the building. On the other side, they found a propped-open back door, walking right through it.

Hugo remained in the doorway as this group fumbled through the dark to a particular portion of the wall. It opened, as secret doors often do, same as Ashlynn demonstrated earlier that day. Music, loud, made itself known, surprising him with how completely the walls hid its sound when the door was closed.

One by one, the students sauntered in. After a few of them did, a very silvery blue glitter cloud exploded from inside, perplexing Hugo further. He almost wished this *was* a job from Donella. At least then he'd have something to go off of other than vague word of mouth. Actually, that was all he usually got.

Once more his freshly wounded mind threatened to cave in on itself, thinking of her, of—

“You!”

A figure standing next to the open wall pointed at him. “Are you here for the dance?” The figure said, almost musically, thanks in part to the music blaring behind her.

“Yeah.” Before he could continue, intending his next words to be “*Who's asking?*” the figure flew (literally flew, wings and all) at him, grabbing his arm and yanking him through the secret door, then past an isolated landing area, finally setting his dizzy feet down at the top of a staircase, where he steadied himself by a stone banister.

From where he now stood, Hugo had no choice but to get a good glimpse at, well, everything! There in the basement, the dance in full swing below. Only this wasn't a basement. It was a ballroom!

Monumental noise, from music and dancing and voices and clicking shoes, mingled together between intricately carved stone walls, pillars holding up the swooping ceiling. What otherwise would've been a classical ballroom was covered in every possible kind of heart decor, balloons, streamers, tables of food and refreshments, (electric) chandeliers covered in color-tinting fabrics, pink, red, purple, gold, their bright true-hearts-day-themed lights blanketing everything and everyone. That was saying something!

Though Briar underestimated the number of guests, this massive space accommodated them. Most were dancing. Some enjoyed sweets and (what looked to be) punch, sitting at pink and red-clothed tables with lava lamps in their centers. Others filtered in and out of what appeared to be side-rooms by the ballroom walls' corners. Again, though, most were dancing. Laughing, spinning, smiling. So many people, the majority of whom Hugo did not know. Nor did he ever try to know them. All of them, literally *all* of them looked, each in their own unique way, outrageously fashionable. Unreasonably fashionable. *Magically* fashionable.

"Feeling underdressed?" The winged stranger asked, a tad too close.

Hugo moved away, back into the unseen landing, closer to the secret door, away from any of the crowd's eyes. "What are you? The fashion-bouncer?" An incredulous title, not meant for even a semi-serious answer. And yet, she gave one.

"Sorta!"

Now in the light, Hugo saw her more clearly. Wings like glass. Kaleidoscope dress like sky and silver, pastel purple and blue curly hair. If he had to guess, this was the Farrah Goodfairy, future Fairy Godmother of Cinderella's story. She was in a few of his destiny-related classes (the ones involving magic). He could remember her standing out the few times their lessons dipped into fashion magic. Her specialty was making real designs in her mind, a talent difficult for even the most talented magician.

His assumption of her identity was confirmed when she took out a small wand, silver with a star at its point, from one of her dress pockets (of course a student with fashion-magic would have dress pockets).

"I'm more like the last-minute fashion advisor. Some people felt nervous about leaving school *looking* like they were going to a party, so I'm here to give them the best True Hearts Day attire they can dream of!" She smiled, then winced. "Temporarily."

Right. Hugo recalled all her spells, fashion ones especially, only ever lasted until the clock struck twelve, whether that be noon or midnight. A side effect no one else seemed to have (though very few magicians could create entirely tangible outfits at all; no replacing the real thing). A bookmark of being the next Fairy Godmother.

"Yes, any fashion I provide will revert back to what you're wearing now by midnight," Farrah clarified, "but it'll be real as rain till then."

"Generous."

"More like self-preservation," Farrah sighed. "I'm not a big party person. I'd much rather listen to the music and practice my magic. Now," she twirled her wand. "What kind of outfit do you want? All the designs are my own, except one. I got a special request for somebody named Hugo."

The somebody named Hugo in question gave her a deadpan look, stretching on for quite a while, until, "Oh *you're* Hugo!"

"Ding ding ding," though he came across as dry, his curiosity did demand to know more. "What do you mean special request?"

“I’m in Fashion Design class with Rapunzel,” *of course* Hugo thought, letting her continue. “She had a bunch of stuff for her friends, but wasn’t sure if you were coming. Said it was a ‘last minute decision’ on your part,” *True*, he admitted internally, having accepted Varian’s offer earlier that day.

Farrah checked her dress pockets again, taking out a folded up sheet of paper. “So, she gave me the design she drew up for you! ‘Just in case’ is what she said.”

It wasn’t that the offer wasn’t tempting. He was certainly curious to see what Rapunzel thought up for him. Knowing everyone here looked their best when he didn’t Hugo certainly hit his pride. But, “Yeah, no thank you. I’ve got this, well...” *Bookmark-like curse. But not a bookmark. Just a regular curse of undetermined origin that appeared without warning.* He really didn’t want to discuss this with a stranger. He barely wanted to discuss it with anyone. Anyone other than Varian

“Let me guess,” Farrah interjected. “Any magic you conjure, and any magical items embedded with magic you use, goes haywire?”

What was it with winged-students acting like they could see right through him? Cause, yeah, she was right, but that didn’t make the habit any less annoying.

“I was informed of that,” she said. “What happens when you merely *hold* a magical item, or have your hands on it. Haywire then?”

Thinking for a moment, the best example he could think of was the flying staff Varian made. Despite being seated on it beforehand, the problems only started up when he was the one steering it, throwing some of his magic into its system to get it away from that tornado. “I suppose not.”

“See! It’s the same in this case! You aren’t *using* the clothes you wear. More like you’re holding them super close!” Farrah smiled wide.

Another group of students arrived. The fairy assured him he could think over the offer while she helped them out, leaving him be as she fluttered away.

As the bursts of blue magic dust started firing off, Hugo shuffled away from the landing. In doing so, he inched closer to the party’s line of sight, and vice versa. He wasn’t looking for anyone in particular. He wasn’t. In fact, he was about to investigate the strange painted symbols he could make out on the ceiling, most of them too uncoordinated to discern a pattern. Yet, standing above this indescribably vast room, this sea of sickeningly beautiful people, his eyes found something else: his roommate, dancing amongst his friends.

What a rarity. Hugo thought. *No goggles on Goggles.*

Varian’s black hair was pushed back in a neat manner, framing his face, with two twin braids tucked along the sides of his head, interweaving his hairstripe.

He wore a bright, rose red tie, tucked into a dark blue vest over a garnet button up shirt, collar folded, sleeves rolled to his elbows. From what could be seen from the balcony, he wore a two-sided apron-looking blue skirt, over a pair of black dress pants. Even from this distance, he could recognise the boots he wore, what he called his “best boots” (they still had chemical stains and burns, just less than his other pairs did). If memory serves him right, the sewn-in designs on them,

blurry at this distance, were of autumn leaves. Overall, he shimmered. Or, perhaps, that was an optical illusion; a result of the most prominent, breathtaking detail.

Varian was smiling.

He didn't know. He *couldn't* know. How could he smile like that if he knew the truth about the Storybook? Relief, so palpable he could taste it, overcame him. That, and something else, too lovely to name. It knocked the wind out of him.

How hadn't he seen him right away? Now that he'd found him, he was captivated by his roommate. His wonderful roommate. His roommate's hand came up to his face, brushing what must've been a stray hair from his eyes.

No gloves either. Another rarity. Hugo thought, wondering how warm they'd be. He'd seen him without them before, on a few early mornings and late evenings. He recalled them looking sort of calloused and uneven. How nice it would be to hold—

With a sudden, wide-eyed gaze, Varian saw Hugo too.

Retreating to the wall, out of sight, took two steps. Why did it leave him out of breath? *What the hell was that??*

There Farrah waited, giddy, wand in one hand, paper held out to him in the other, waiting for him to answer her foremost question.

Now look, he didn't need to get all dressed up for Varian, of all people. That wasn't what this was. This was a very nice dance (which he so virtuously helped organize) and he'd neglected to get himself dolled up in his downtrodden state. Varian got dressed up for the occasion (and he looked great).

Hugo couldn't possibly, in good conscience, approach someone he felt so much respect and admiration for while so underdressed!

In any case, his dance was actually doing what he hoped it would. Giving Varian a fun night before reality came crashing down on him. Maybe Hugo could try something alike: forgetting. Faking a smile wasn't the worst thing in the world. Usually, around Varian, he forgot he was faking at all.

So, if a famously fashion-magic wielding student and long-haired designer-artist offered to help him, who was he to refuse?

Taking the paper, examining it, heart jumping in delight, he decided.

Carefully, he took Olivia out of his pocket, not wanting her to disappear (temporarily or not). "Leave the makeup, glasses, and these," he tapped the decorations hanging from the arms, "alone."

Farrah waved her wand.

At breakneck speed (as much as the densely packed space would allow) Varian shoved his way through across the ballroom, ignoring any and all looks of annoyance as he went. He was a man on a mission.

When he'd broken away from his friends, frantically shouting who he was going after, they didn't seem too surprised. Though, once he was almost out of earshot, Varian swore he heard one of them say something sounding suspiciously like "—down bad good *god* —" But none of that mattered right then. He needed to get to the spiral staircase, he needed to see that the friend he invited truly did show up, he needed to see Hugo.

That was Hugo, right? He'd only caught his eye for a split second before he vanished behind a wall. *Peculiar.* It wasn't like him to shy away, if that's what happened at all. No, Hugo wasn't bashful. Whether he was or not, Varian wouldn't be the cause. It must be something else.

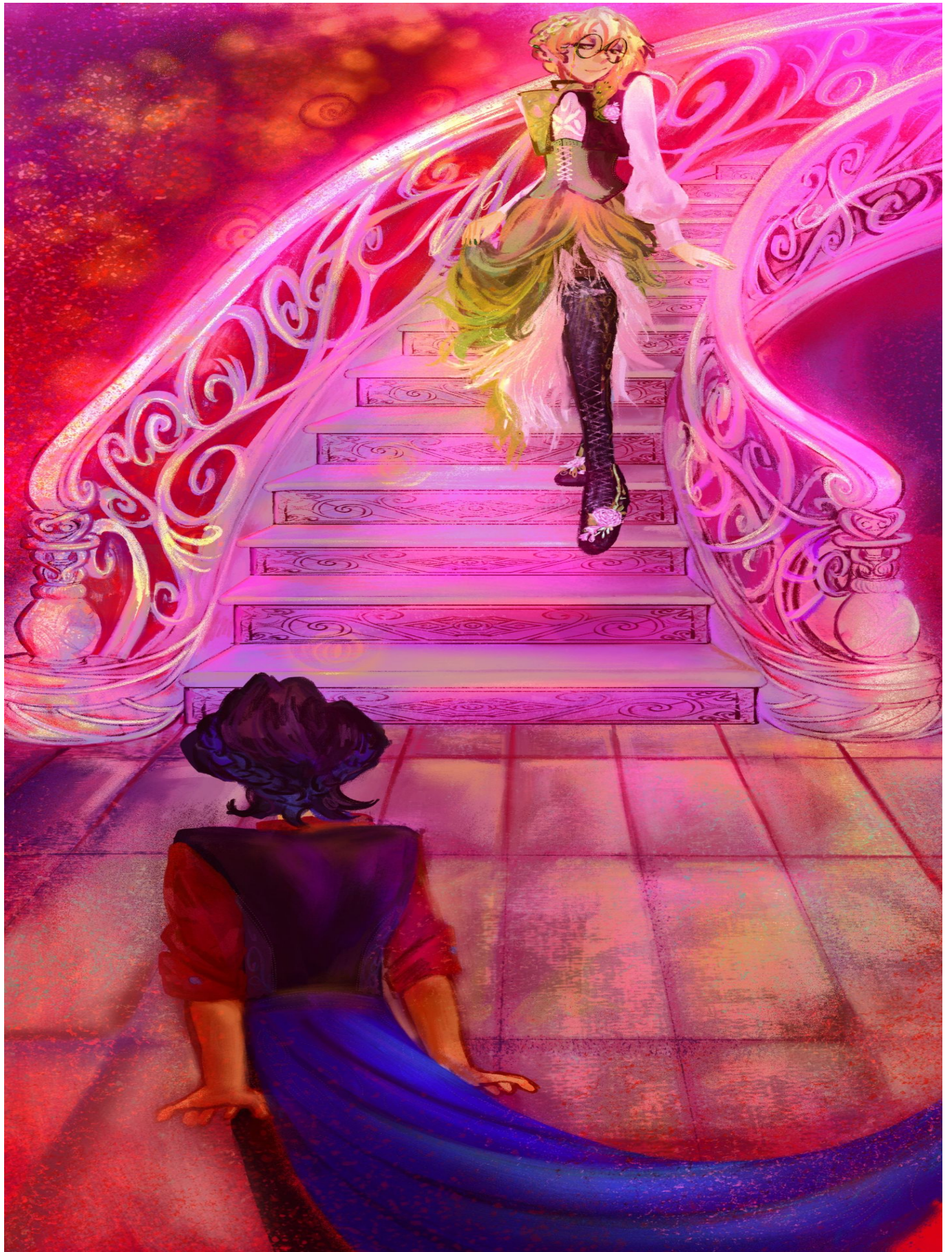
Did Hugo find the decoded notes?

Varian had hidden them best he could, not wanting his roommate to happen upon such volatile information alone. As Varian had. It was the right choice. That discussion was better had later; later, a dreadful word.

A new song started. Like a hivemind, the crowd jostled violently all at once. Literally knocked out of his thoughts, Varian resumed his strides, annoyed but thankful. With all this loud and ear-shattering music, and constant movement, thinking wasn't an easy task. That was a blessing for more than one reason tonight. It held the floodgates back, helping prevent too much spiraling. At least, it *was* helping (both regarding the notes and certain feelings he was trying to shove down). As he reached the stone spiral staircase, old-fashioned and ornate, the notion that his roommate was here kept cracking the dam. He could imagine how much harder that would be with Hugo close by, acting all smart and handsome and wonderful and so very alive and—

Walking down the stairs.

Oh. *Oh, wow.*



Where Varian's attire centered around his favorite color, blue, and one true hearts day color, red, Hugo had done something similar. Pale green corset, pink shirt with fancy sleeves, emerald and near-black shrug top, a fresh flower tucked into the breast pocket, asymmetrical skirt with peacock feathers and pastel ruffles, and black over-the-knee boots with heels and blooming flowers along the vamp. Blond hair on one side lay braided over his shoulder. The other side was covered in emerald crystals, woven into a tight side-braid, running along his head. They matched his eyes, framed as always by his glasses.

Hugo looked like he walked right out of a love story; like he wasn't real. Green eyes found blue ones, and Varian wasn't filled with dread anymore. He was just a young man enamoured with—

"Damn, Goggles," Hugo stopped a few steps up. "If I knew you cleaned up this well, I would've put a little more effort into my appearance."

A self-assured asshole.

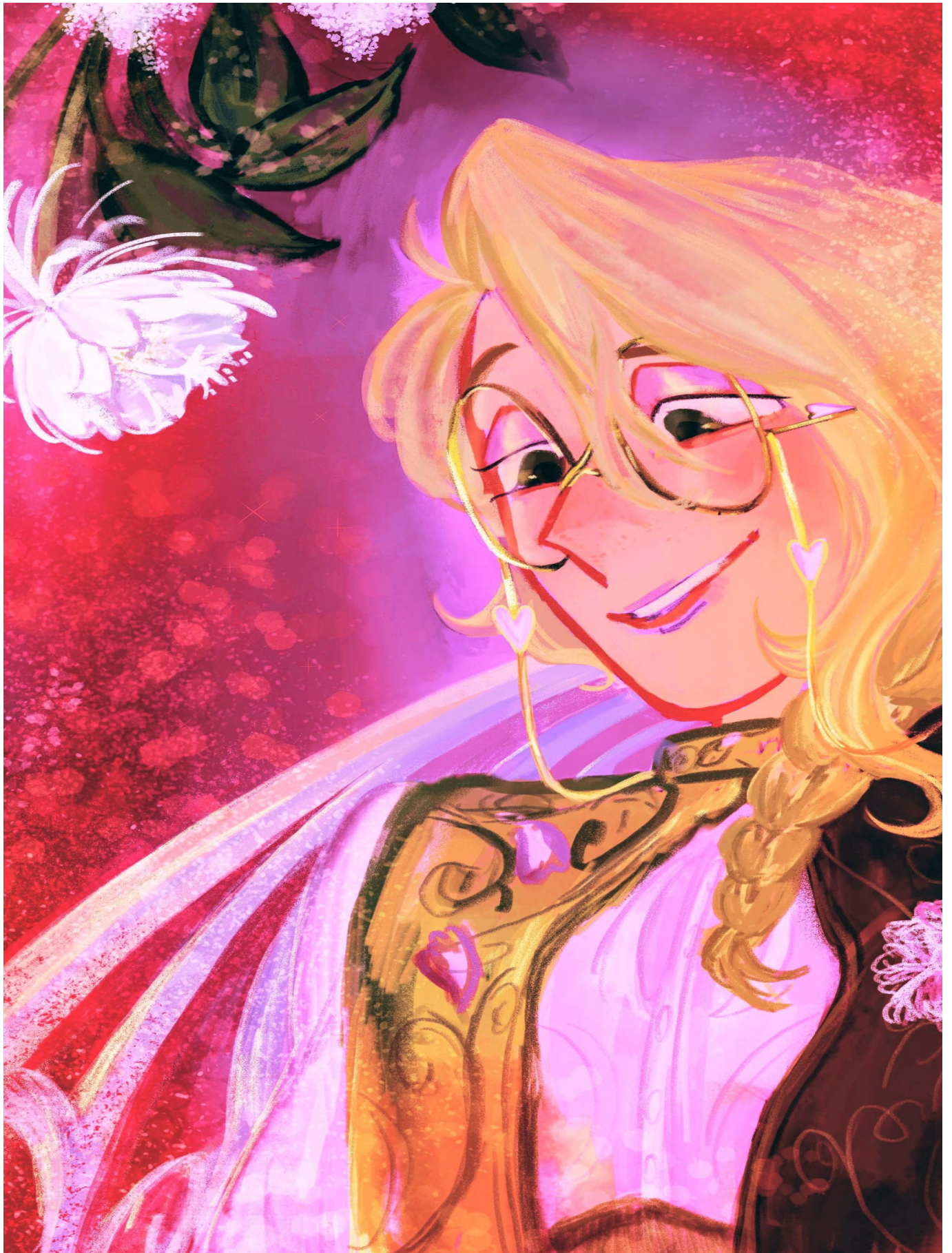
"Are you kidding me?" Varian shot back, acutely aware of how warm his face felt. How the hell could Hugo look *that good* and act *casual about it*?! Not fair.

"Not gonna return the compliment?" Hugo feigned offense. "Farm Boy, where are your manners?"

At least his words were still annoying. Thank goodness.

If Varian wasn't back to reality already, that little nickname did the trick. "As if you're not way too used to compliments," a huff. "Your Highness."

"From you?"



Hugo scoffed. "Never."

Though perfectly content to keep trading playful insults (a wonderful means of ignoring how, again, *unfairly good* his roommate looked), the hesitance in his roommate's next step gave him pause.

"Why are you going so slow?"

"Goggles," Hugo hissed, composure slipping. "I'm in heels, walking down stone stairs. I'm—" he stumbled, catching himself on the railing.

In his smartly chosen, practical boots, Varian scrambled up the steps, taking one of his roommate's arms. Hugo muttered a soft "thanks", blinking, drawing attention to the makeup around his eyes which Varian did not want to think about for too long. At this reduced distance, he also saw the twin chains hanging from the sides of his roommate's glasses, each with small heart-shaped crystals on them. A much easier sight on his poor, hopeless heart.

"Nice, right?" Hugo tapped the glasses decorations. Burying the embarrassment of being caught staring, Varian forced himself to nod. "Princess Shoeless left them for me," he continued, as his roommate rolled his eyes. "All her designs. I'm a veritable collage of her work tonight. Other than the makeup," he held his head high. "T'was my handiwork."

Varian hummed. "Looks nice."

"What was that?" Hugo tilted his head, incredulous, leaning closer.

Varian flushed. "I said—" No, he *meant*, and what came out regardless, "You look nice."

"See?" Hugo smirked as they disembarked the final step. "Was that so hard?"

Varian wrenched his arm away, attempting to look furious. "Still feels like *I* haven't gotten a compliment."

"Oh? The very first thing I said wasn't sweet enough?"

"As if you *can* be sweet."

"Goggles, you have no idea."

Their faces were close. It was at this most inconvenient moment that Varian realized, like cold water was dumped onto him, that he had no plan for tonight.

Asking Hugo to the dance was nothing more than a heat of the moment decision driven by the euphoria of a scientific breakthrough and Rapunzel's encouraging words. Not rational thoughts. Now, that lapse in judgement left him stuck spending a night in the epicenter of love-themed celebrations with the one person he was trying not to *think of in that way for the sake of their friendship shit shit SHIT*.

Obviously, his grander, long-term plan had not changed: after True Hearts Day, free of all this pomp and circumstance that refused to let him forget, Varian would put away this crush. Then he'd be free! No more romantic scenarios, no more lovey-dovey holidays. Just two roommates, friends at best, rivals at very best, and foils at worst. Comfortable in their dynamic, as they should stay, with no more crush distracting him, making him think crazy things. That was still the plan.

Yet here he was, facing off the object of these disastrous, unhelpful, unwanted, inconvenient feelings. He'd survived a whole week of ignoring it all (to limited success), so he knew how all-consuming it could be. Fighting against the current.

What Varian hadn't accounted for, not until mere moments ago, was how desperately he *wanted* that distraction. A distraction from *other* things he couldn't bear thinking about. The things they needed to discuss, when the time was right.

Ulla's findings.

Thus, staring down the barrel of it all, Varian settled on a short-term plan.

For tonight, until the time was right to confront those *other* things, Varian would indulge his foolish heart.

Well, indulge wasn't the right word. This would be more like... microdosing on feelings! Exercising moderation! Window shopping with only one window!

What a great idea, Varian. Varian told himself. *There is no possibility this could backfire, Varian!*

A new song started, thankfully un-romantic and extremely loud. Varian was not planning on slow dancing with his roommate, no matter how amazing that sounded (IN THEORY). In practice? Terrifying, reckless, not worth the embarrassment he would rought upon himself as a result. But a song like this? Exactly the middle ground he could work with.

Probably.

"Goggles," Hugo said, rigid, observant, no longer close. "Are you good?"

"Do you wanna dance?"

Hugo blinked, once again drawing him back to the eyes glittering behind his glasses.

Pretty. Varian let himself think, without shoving down. In the same second, his breath hitched, gaze fled, hands felt sweaty. Wow they got sweaty fast.

So, big surprise, maybe suddenly (sort of) acting on super intense feelings after a week of ignoring them was a shock to the system.

"That's not to say you need *me* around to dance," he barked out a skittish laugh. "I'm used to dancing on my own, which probably sounds really sad when I say it out loud. That's irrelevant. Totally irrelevant. Anyway! Even though I'm more used to that than this here—" he tried to take a breath. It came out more like a weird, reverse cough. "I'd like to dance with you."

He almost added the word 'platonically' and sealed his fate, cause why even bring that up if you're *not* harboring a terrible romantic confession! Of course it was platonic that went without saying. Saying it would be redundant, suspicious—

"I'm barely hearing you," Hugo shouted. "Wanna dance?"

Before he could lose the nerve, Varian took his arm, not his hand, dragging him to the floor, resolving not to allow this method of distraction to get out of hand.

Hugo followed Varian. Not like he had much choice; his grip was freakishly strong.

If that was the worst of his problems tonight, he'd count his lucky stars. So far, so good. All it took was a bit of banter with his friend and Hugo wasn't even thinking about *you know who* or his and his roommate's mutually impending doom!

As they reached a suitably open spot on the dance floor, a look of apprehension overtook Varian's face. "Wait."

Well, now Hugo was thinking about it. *He knows. He must've decoded—*

"*Can you* dance in heels?"

As relieved as he was (and a little concerned how quickly he almost crumbled), Hugo could do nothing but squawk. "What makes you think *I can't*?"

Silent, stone-faced, Varian glanced in the direction of the stairs.

"You try walking down stone steps in heels, then we'll talk!"

"But you *can* dance in heels?" Varian loosened his hold.

That... wasn't the right question. Of course he could dance in heels! The real issue was the dancing itself.

Let it be reiterated: Hugo had never been to a party. At least, not one for people his age. The occasional gala or royal event with the Sorcerer, sure, he had that covered. He knew how to make himself unseen and unheard there. He knew how to dance like the people there; one on one, waltzes, fancy shit like that. He knew how to smile politely and bury any sign of discomfort or unsureness. Those were the parties he knew. Organized and stiff and mercifully rare.

This, in contrast, was utter chaos and, consequently, a double-edged sword. Easy to blend into, not so easy to get used to. But Hugo could adapt. He always did. He always *did*.

Not that that talent did him any good in the end—

"There's no wrong way to dance." Barely audible over the music, Varian did a little box step.

Thoughtful ass. He'd sensed his apprehension way too easily. "Oh good! I'll start the mosh pit." Hugo swayed a step or two away. "I'm sure you won't mind if I elbow you in the face."

With the way the music dipped up and down, there was a brief possibility that he hadn't heard the jab, which would've been a great disappointment. The possibility vanished when Varian, slow and deliberate, swung his leg at Hugo's knee, stopping before contact. He shrugged, "I won't mind."

Touché.

Conceding, Hugo tried out that box step. Varian brightened seeing his attempt, transitioning to a vine-step to the side. He tried that too. On and on, he watched, replicated. Adapted. Though, he couldn't help feeling this would be easier if they were closer. His roommate maintained a respectful

distance, keeping his ungloved hands to himself. He was not giving it much thought. Nor did he give much thought to how *startlingly* hard “not giving it much thought” was.

It wasn't long before his roommate's friends (*their* friends?) found them. Nuru, the first to jump into the fray, looked as uniquely fabulous as everyone else.

Her style was stellar. Literally. For even when she wasn't in her star form she looked like a star in human form. This could explain why her dress was so oddly familiar (those that didn't feel like the right answer). On top of that, she had countless little stars in her hair and a pair of glow in the dark, star-shaped sunglasses. She also wore a planetary-pattern shall over her shoulders, with matching heels, and twin gold charm bracelets (space charms, of course).

Seriously though, he'd definitely seen that dress before. *Wait a second.* “Is that your Legacy Day dress?”

“Yes!” Nuru rotated 360 degrees on her axis. “The Royal Student Council has access to the Legacy Day storage. Figured I could borrow this for one night.”

“That was an option?!” Hugo exclaimed. “You're telling me I could've done that?!”

“You have yet to earn friend-on-the-Royal-Student-Council privileges.”

Mood swinging from disappointed to satisfied on a dime, Hugo batted his eyelashes. “Yet?”

The charm bracelets she wore were easier to see once she flicked his forehead hand, laughing. “You know, I was beginning to *think*, ” she said like she meant *hope*, “you weren't showing up.”

“And deprive the people of my wonderful self?” That made Varian laugh. Hugo's grin melted into something softer.

At last, the remainder of the gang finally emerged from the crowd, having heard the last snippet of conversation. Eugene, in particular, huffed. “You know, Nuru, I had the same thought! Though, I assumed, after he absolutely begged for help this afternoon, flaking wouldn't be the move.” The same preference lay in both their tones. Hugo was starting to think these two didn't like him. So sad.

“Wait,” Varian interjected. “Help with what?”

Shit.

Frankly, he'd gone into this assuming one or more of his fellow party-helpers could've mentioned it to him. Based on the collective shrug the others offered Hugo as they got back to dancing, it seemed they had not. That task was left to him, and him alone.

“Hey. Help with *what?*” Varian asked again, insistently curious.

Maybe it was a trick of the light, but it almost seemed like his eyes sparkled. In correlation, not causation, to this factor, Hugo was hesitant to admit how hard he worked to make sure this dance happened.

So, being a little shit, he ignored his roommate, redirecting his attention to Rapunzel. Her hair was a brown bob, the color it turned when cut. The blonde of it would return when it grew back to its

incredible length, likely by the end of the week. Magic hair, a bookmark of being the next Rapunzel (the official one).

“Thanks for, well...” he tapped his glasses decorations, then gestured to the whole outfit. She beamed, proud of her work and designs, magical or not.

“Hey!” Varian barked, as the music’s volume rose once more.

Hugo twirled away, smug, waving his hand by his ear to silently communicate, “*When it’s not so loud,*” mouthing, “Later.”

With the way Varian stared at him, totally not pouting (he was totally pouting), he’d be holding him to that.

In the meantime, Hugo took stock of the others. With the exception of Nuru, they were Rebels, through and through, and looked nothing like they did on Legacy Day.

Rapunzel, a collage of suns, sunflowers, and hearts littering her halter dress, all seemingly hand stitched, embroidered, and painted on, all with shining yellows, soft oranges, and sunrise purples. Still no shoes. Weird (and potentially painful). The second homemade outfit belonged to Eugene, who admittedly didn’t look terrible, most likely thanks to his girlfriend, wearing a semi-formal (tie included) get-up of the same shades she did. The main difference lay in the embroidered moons, sunset clouds, gemstones, and hearts (those were the same as hers). Speaking of, the hearts were the only part of their attire that actually fit the theme. The couple took every song as an opportunity to dance together.

The singles cut loose. Cassandra wore a black jumpsuit, lined with decorative chainmail. The sleeve ends of which were braided with yarn-heart charms, similar to the one’s on Hugo’s glasses. No doubt Rapunzel’s addition once again. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Lance wore a suit worthy of a gala, rather than a secret dance, all in true hearts day colors: red, pink, purple, with a matching scarf. A heart-shaped earring shone from his one pierced ear. *Finally, somebody actually followed the holiday theme*, he thought. Though, he supposed the rest of them did too, by dressing how their “true hearts” wanted. They each looked fitted for a different occasion.

As they danced, the transitions between songs went unnoticed by Hugo. In the haze and noise, their collective joy proved infectious. Varian, still two steps away, danced with renewed vigor.

His eyes had trouble staying off him. They both had that problem, it seemed. Great minds think alike, though Hugo wasn’t sure he could replicate that smile, not with the same brightness applied.

They were in the eye of a storm; too practically was Hugo to completely forget that. Yet, as they danced and danced and danced some more, he found himself inexplicably capable of forgetting as much as he could.

By the end of the sixth, or seventh, or eighth (lost count) song, two steps away became one. Hugo long since stopped copying his roommate’s movements; he copied his own (from earlier, when they moved through a less dense space). It certainly satisfied his curiosity, taking his roommate’s hand. As predicted, calloused and uneven. Hugo spun him without warning or preamble. He yelped (adorably) and stumbled, stepping closer and unfortunately right on one of Hugo’s magical heels. His wince was unignorable, and though Varian looked apologetic, he didn’t stop laughing. In fact, he laughed so heartily that his face went red!

Maturely, Hugo returned the favor, getting Varian to spin him this time (he'd neglected to let go of his hand, so this was easy) and stepping on his boot (much lighter than he'd received).

Gasping in mock-offense, sneering, still laughing, Varian gave him a mighty (not at all; it was one handed) shove, which he easily should have shrugged off. He did not (reminder: heels), but the close quarters of the crowd stopped him from falling. While he'd expected that Varian, apparently, had not. Almost immediately following the shove, Varian took hold of his arms, turning one step away into practically none.

Time seemed to slow. No, not time. The music! Instead of another fast-paced song, the DJ had thrown on a slow song. Tangentially...

"I think we've been abandoned."

Varian whipped his head this way and that, watching his friends leaving the dance floor, leaving the two of them on their lonesome. "Traitors," he muttered.

All around, party patrons paired up. All strangers to Hugo. As for the non-strangers (or, as a rational person would call them, friends), Varian looked as though he wanted to crawl out of his skin.

In all honesty, Hugo wasn't far behind. Which was odd, to say the least. He'd danced with Varian before. In their dorm! Held him close. Yes, he'd been laughing and being overdramatic for the sake of a bit, but how different was that from this? Very different, apparently, because Hugo suddenly felt all his energy and confidence sap away. Did he—

"Wanna see something cool?" Varian blurted out. "Away from the dancing?"

"Yes," Hugo said too quickly, somehow startling his roommate into an even deeper state of discomfort.

A break from the action might do them both some good.

For the record, Varian wasn't a coward. He just wasn't in the mood to dance anymore. Whether or not the song playing when he decided that happened to be a slow song wasn't a relevant factor.

Yep.

(Okay listen. Indulging one's heart is great in theory, and fun when solely done in his mind, but in practice, in ACTIONS, it's nerve racking as hell! They'd been so *close* — and his *hand* — and *why couldn't he stop laughing when he did that???*)

Anyhow, there was more to do at this party than dance.

This basement-ballroom had food, drinks, and two side-rooms, both open and easily accessible, and full of people taking a break from the main space. One housed a staircase up to the building's tower-balcony. The other, the one they moved toward, had no stairs, just something cool.

Pushing through, Varian's gaze drifted up. The ceiling was made up of several massive, squared-off concave shapes. Each one's corner trailed into the pillar holding everything up. On the panels making up these spaces, intricate wall paintings shimmered in the party lights. In one, a red apple.

In another, a rose. A glass slipper. A seashell, a tower, a bevy of swans, a hat with a playing card. Next to that last one, a pair of vivid red heels. Every design from a story within the Storybook of Legends. Every story with a faceless successor. Another link in the same chain.

Varian glanced back at his roommate, finding him looking up too.

“On the other end of the room, there’s a mop surrounded by sparkles,” he said, stopping his stride, “I saw it earlier. That’s your story’s symbol, right?”

Hugo’s expression twisted.

What’s that look for? Varian thought. *What did I say? All I mentioned was his story...*

That couldn’t be it.

Sure, things hadn’t been going well with the Sorcerer lately (Hugo rarely spoke of the matter. Varian didn’t push for details but he still had eyes and a brain and enough sense to assume his roommate wasn’t on speaking terms with his mother currently) since the incident in her lecture. Even with all that going on, Hugo *never before* made a face like that when his story was brought up.

He didn’t look like himself.

Then it was gone, dashed into neutrality. He nodded, then chuckled. “Like you didn’t already know that.”

“Well, excuse me for double checking!” Varian rolled his eyes. “It’s not like your symbol is the linchpin of your whole story, like those stupid shoes are in mine.”

Hugo chuckled, heartier.

“I’m serious!” Varian groaned, tallying with his fingers. “A gift from a Good Witch, a magical transportation device that I’m not allowed to use ‘til the end, an ‘I’m Dorothy’ identifier, someone else’s family heirloom *and* a murder trophy, all in one!”

The laughter stopped. “That’s a little heavy, Goggles.”

“Yeah! It is!” Varian crossed his arms. “So, sorry if it’s not as straightforward as *your* story’s—”

“Are we just gonna stand around? I was promised something ‘cool’ to see.” Without warning, Hugo took his arm (not his hand, disappointingly, thankfully, horribly), taking the lead in shifting through the crowd.

Varian tried not to make assumptions. He tried not to jump back to his mother’s research, of the findings. This couldn’t be that, could it? No, no. Please, no.

Hopefully not.

Electing to keep an eye on... whatever *this* was, he waited til Hugo realized he didn’t actually know where they were going. At which point, Varian reluctantly (indulgently appreciating the contact for a moment) pulled his arm away, leading the way.

Maybe Hugo should've asked for that slow dance after all, no matter how (perplexingly) daunting it seemed.

Off the dance floor, forgetting his strife was a difficult task, even in the Varian's presence. Unaware, blissfully ignorant, doomed Varian. At least his words reinforced that his roommate had nothing worth worrying about yet. Yet. *That* helped. A bit. The sooner they got back to the floor, the better. Either way, he considered it a mercy when they finally arrived at their destination, trading the images above for images ahead. A doorless side-room.

From the circular shape of the walls (one wall, cornerless), it was reasonable to assume this was part of one of the towers he'd seen from the building's exterior. Said wall of smooth stone was covered in paper hearts, all True Hearts Day colors. Around the room, several people he didn't recognize were taking more from a basket, writing on them, and sticking them up. There was also a little table of refreshments.

"The others and I came through here earlier." Varian beelined for a few particular hearts tapped so close they nearly overlapped. "This one's Rapunzel's. And this one Eugene. Nuru's is the one with all the stars drawn in the margin. Oh! And here..." he rattled off.

Hugo tuned him out. No one signed a name to theirs, a detail he wished he didn't notice. He tried not to read any of them, *hear* any of them.

Once again, his roommate's enthusiasm calmed his nerves a fraction. Of *course* Varian knew nothing. How else could he speak so enthusiastically? How else could he harp on promises he couldn't keep? Dreams his friends wouldn't get to fulfill. If he was still this invested in his friend's true hearts, he couldn't know...

"Either the Storybook is capable of being de-powered, and no one gets a story, or it stays as it is. There is no middle ground. You'll see."

Unless... What if it hadn't set in? Just as Hugo was trying to forget and deter a total breakdown, perhaps, so was Varian.

Or, worse, maybe the all-or-nothing outcome Donella warned didn't deter him.

Maybe Varian was prepared to put himself at risk, make himself an enemy of so many powerful people, royals both in power and expecting to *be* so someday, so everyone could have their own path.

All options Hugo wasn't eager to confront tonight, especially in conjunction with revelations about his own story (i.e: his lack thereof). So, yeah, this wall was not "cool" to him. It—

Varian stared, frowns burrowed, not surprised but concerned. Hugo knew what he was about to ask, and he had no guarantee he could fake an answer.

Then, beside them, a cough as light as a ticking clock caught their attention. "Hugo, right?" Ashlynn Ella, dressed in a flowy spring dress covered in blue and pink pastels (did this girl ever *not* wear pastels?), approached. "I thought I recognized you."

"You two know each other?" Varian's gaze flickered between them.

"We met today! He was here helping—"

“With boring stuff,” Hugo interrupted, though he wasn’t sure why, “unimportant things, not worth mulling over.”

Varian grew confused. “But she didn’t say what—”

Hugo stuck his whole hand to Varian’s mouth, successfully distracting him! And, most likely, infuriating him! Yay! “How nice of you to host the dance,” he remarked to the princess, ignoring his impending doom. “A very last minute decision, as I recall.”

Ashlynn watched as Varian, furious, pried the hand away, as Hugo, a touch too pleased with himself, smirked. She seemed to accept that whatever this was, it wasn’t her circus. “My mom always said to keep this ballroom a secret. Not even my roommate knew about it! ‘Cinderella must have a room all her own.’ That’s what she’d say, but this party predicament seemed more important.”

With a last huff (directed at Hugo), Varian asked the host, “I’m guessing your mom is the one who put those destiny-themed paintings up?”

Hugo tensed.

“She won’t let me touch them, and I don’t have the heart to anyhow! Relics of when she first built the store. There’s other details like that around here,” the princess explained, bashful and candid. “If you go back to the staircase, you’ll actually find a little stone-carved hat in the last baluster — my mom and the Mad Hatter were friends once upon a time.”

“I see,” Hugo muttered, nodding back to the paper hearts. “Adding to the stone is a familial thing, then?” *Typical Royal*, Hugo thought, *trying to be the spitting image of their predecessor*.

And yet...

“You could say that,” she said like she wasn’t proud of it, thoroughly surprising Hugo. Then, complexion currently adjacent to *deja vu*, she addressed them both. “You gonna add one?”

“I did!” Varian interjected. “This guy has not.”

Hugo shrugged, the question uncomfortable to him and him alone. This was still a princess’ store, a royal no less. She could be like Briar; blasé about the actual meaning behind the holiday, more interested in the party itself. Pinning up a written account of his deepest desire in her territory seemed like a trap. He still wasn’t sure *why* she offered to host after they lost the initial party location.

All that aside... He still wanted his destiny. That hadn’t changed, wouldn’t change, even if (no more if) though he wasn’t going to get it. Writing about it wouldn’t change that.

“I can tell you what he’ll stick up there,” Varian spoke, deliberately, like he was testing a variable, as those bright, hopeful eyes stared up at Hugo. “His destiny.”

Not my destiny. Hugo’s stomach churned, turning to the wall, a different though not kinder sight.

Every hope here that isn't destined isn't going to happen. Including Varian's.

Neither of us are getting what we wanted.

The body of the storm, not the eye, invaded his mind, swirling around a few simple truths. The worst of all:

When push comes to shove, in both cases, that's my fault.

“Hugo?”

He stepped back, turning to the princess. “Oh, host! You wouldn’t happen to have a powder room around here, would you?” He put on his airiest voice. “I’d like to check my face.”

Ashlynn pointed. “Other side of the room. The door kinda blends into the wall. It’s next to the fuse-box, which also blends in but—”

Hugo was already moving. “I’ll only be a moment! Don’t miss me too much, Goggles.”

He didn’t stay for an answer. Not that there was one to hear. What he did hear was a joke, or an attempt at one, from the future Cinderella. “That one comes and goes like he’s on a curfew.”

Varian didn’t laugh, though he did appreciate the outreach. Ashlynn’s words weren’t meant as an insult. Her expression remained too softly concerned for that to be a possibility. Worry, plain and simple, must’ve read off him like an open book.

When he gets back, Varian decided. I'll ask him if he's okay. Directly, this time.

“You know more about that than me,” he tried returning the favor.

Despite being a Rebel, through and through, it wasn’t unheard of for Varian to catch himself judging fellow students first and foremost by their destiny. A consequence of a world, town, school all centering the mystical, untouchable idea of destiny. It was a habit he’d fought to break with increasing urgency, though he assumed if anyone fit the bill of their story, it would be one of the Big Three Storybook successors. He should’ve known better. It should not have (but did) come as a great surprise when Ashlynn appeared suddenly very unsure.

As though she wasn’t sure how to phrase herself.

Until she did. “I’m a rebel.”

What.

A man of science at heart, Varian pivoted first from surprise to curiosity, then curiosity to inquiries. Assumption is cheap, knowledge is earned. After all, he didn’t actually know this student personally. Last he’d checked, she *was* a royal (in the school-sense; wanting to follow destiny). A close friend of Apple White, a royal among Royals. “Is this new?”

“Kinda,” she tapped her glass heel repeatedly on the floor, speaking as though she’d just remembered how to breathe. She paced toward a little table of food and drinks that’d been set up in this side-room. “Most people know I’m dating a Rebel — well, *now* they know — but they don’t know *I’m* one,” she absently picked up an apple. “No better time to start saying it outloud than True Hearts Day.”

“If I can ask,” he pressed on, buzzing. “What made you want your own path?”

The story of Cinderella of Ever After's crown jewel fairytales; one of the 'Big Three,' alongside Snow White and Sleeping Beauty. Ashlynn would live as her family's servant for a time, get a visit from her fairy godmother (also a current student at Ever After; Farrah Goodfairy), attend a ball, lose a shoe, be found by her destined true love, and live Happily Ever After with all the wealth, and fame she could ever dream of. A comfortable destiny.

While Varian wasn't destined for the same grandness, he knew a thing or two about having a "comfortable" destiny that wasn't wanted.

Ashlynn understood his meaning. "I suppose I've loved my story all my life. I've prepared for it, the good and the bad, every way I could, because it was all stepping stones to the ending."

"Happily Ever After."

Ashlynn hummed. She walked to her wall, adjusting a few heart-shaped papers, death-gripping the apple in her other hand. "I don't think it's worth it anymore."

"Don't hear it from *royal* royals often." Varian knew he sounded a touch too much like his roommate. That didn't make it untrue. Before now, the singular princess he knew who didn't want their destiny was Rapunzel, and she was one of a kind in every way.

"You'd be surprised." Ashlynn stared pointedly at a particular heart.

This one listed about three dozen things, ending with the words "then sleep for a hundred years!" and a sizable signature (one of the only hearts with one). **Briar Beauty**. Her destiny was known by everyone who grew up in Ever After. She would sleep and sleep and sleep, and in a hundred years she'd wake up to a destined true love and everything she could ever want.

Frankly, he'd never want a destiny like that. He didn't know how anyone could. Given her words, and the way she stared at the heart, he bet Ashlynn held the same sentiment. But it wasn't up to the two of them. It shouldn't be.

Varian still wanted a way to depower the Storybook just enough to let people have a real choice in their destinies, where following a story was as feasible as blazing a new path.

The problem?

The notes hadn't mentioned anything *close* to the topic; not in the penultimate pages anyway (he still hadn't cracked the final page, too exhausted to try that day).

What he had discovered instead... *Later*:

"Hey, from one shoe-related destiny-having rebel student to another," fixing his smile, Varian offered the princess a high five (of all things). "Congrats on your epiphany." In the daintiest way imaginable, she accepted the gesture, setting down the apple. "However," he continued, "you still haven't specified what made you change your mind? What was the catalyst?"

His memories of Legacy Day, when Raven Queen refused to sign, flooded back. A fair catalyst for changing hearts, a display of courage he lacked at the time.

"It was a question." She shook her head, a smile forming on her face, framed by a picturesque blush, eyes on the rest of the party beyond this side-room. "Why would I need a destined true love

when I've already found one?"

Immediate, without suppressing the notion, he thought of his roommate. "Yeah."

"Yeah?"

CRAP. He froze. *What did I say?*

"I mean," Varian laughed, clearly perplexing Ashlynn. "I wouldn't know anything about that."

He stepped away, closer to the table to get some punch. Dizzy from how nice it was to think of him like that, he struggled to remind himself that this policy of *indulging* was meant to be a distraction. A *temporary* distraction! For one night, until the time was right to talk about— *LATER*. Then, he'd be done with this crush for good.

That's what he wanted.

Right?

He couldn't indulge too much. That much was clear. If he did, who knows what love-sick mistakes he might say?

"There you are!" Emerging from the partying crowds, Briar, still wearing sunglasses indoors, now also wearing a comfy-looking suit of pink with black rose print, skidded to a halt in front of the other princess. "You! Promised! Me! A! Dance!"

"Okay, okay," Ashlyn laughed.

"Also," she lowered her voice, "Apple's looking for you."

"Yeah, I know," she huffed. "We need to talk."

"Do you know what you're gonna say?"

Ashlynn nodded. Briar, nonjudgmental and satisfied, patted her friend's arm. Varian watched the exchange as he sipped what ended up being an awful cup of punch. Seriously, who made this?

Before her friend could drag her away, Ashlynn's attention flickered back to Varian. "It was lovely speaking with you! Staying here?"

"Waiting for Hugo," he said. Hearing just as much as Ashlynn, Briar stopped in her tracks. Varian didn't make note of that. "I'm kinda the reason he's here at all, so," was an easier explanation than the one his heart was trying to scream out, slipping through the cracks. *Microdosing. Medical. Alchemical.* He reminded himself. *Temporary.*

"Hugo, huh?" Still clinging to her friend, Briar tilted her head. "Blond guy? Tall? Glasses?"

Varian blinked.

With that confirmation, Briar's blooming demeanor grew amused. "Guess Cupid was right."

"Huh?" Both the other students sounded off.

Briar sighed, glancing back at the dancing. “You know, she’s uncannily accurate about these things. She was right about Hunter and Ashlynn *weeks* before either of them fessed up to the rest of us,” that same Ashlynn blushed, her confusion vanishing. “But she’s always cool about it, not throwing readings of people’s hearts in everyone’s face. Though, if *I* were her, I’d cut to the chase way sooner. Why waste everyone’s time by holding back valuable expertise?”

“Huh?” Varian repeated.

“But Hugo,” she continued airily, “all ultra-focused on making sure none of us got in trouble ‘sneaking shit in and out of this ginormous old school,’ his words not mine, had me doubting her. My assumption? A paranoid control freak trying to help.”

“Help?”

“But, I should’ve known better. After all, he did say he needed this dance ‘to go off without a hitch,’” Briar conceded easily. “Right from the jump, Cupid said he did it for someone special.” She gestured to the man of the hour.

“Aw,” Ashlynn put a hand over her heart.

Varian never felt so confused in his life.

“I’m sorry, I’m lost,” he made no effort to hide it. “What are you talking about?”

Briar paused, eyes narrowing. “What do *you* think I’m talking about?”

Ashlynn coughed, frantic, cupping her hand to her friend’s ear, whispering something Varian couldn’t make out.

Briar’s eyes widened. “They’re not?!”

“I don’t think so?”

“Bullshit.”

Varian had no idea what this was but now it was starting to scare him. “Ahem! What was Hugo helping with?!”

Shedding her unsureness, Briar plastered on an unbothered expression. “The dance.”

Processing...

“This dance?”

“Yes.”

More processing...

“WHAT.”

“I see that I need to explain.”

“Please.”

Hugo barely registered the walk across the ballroom. It wouldn't be outlshish to say that he took the journey with his eyes closed, not registering anything until he shoved through a door.

This wasn't one of the side-rooms; it was a powder room. Literally. Only a reflective glass and less-reflective counter (covered in nicknack and expensive pastel-shaded shit that made him sicker) to fill the space, lit with soft sunny lighting from petal shaped lamps, the space looked fit for fixing make-up, and nothing more.

Hugo examined what he saw in the mirror. For a second, he didn't recognize himself. *Magical*. He fixed the braid on his shoulder. *Like a Sorcerer*. He could also tell he'd never looked so ready to crack.

Better to look that way alone.

He could hear the party through the powder room wall. *Hopefully that's the case for this wall alone, and not the outermost ones*. If it wasn't, the noise would attract unwanted attention to this very unallowed, rebellious event. Every song, every voice, every student, royals, rebels, conflicting hopes with no hope of compromise—

From his pocket, Olivia jumped out and onto the counter. Her presence grounded him, leading him to remember. *No, I didn't hear any of the music outside when I got here*. Hugo also remembered to breathe, though it didn't move the truth any which way.

It didn't matter if everyone at Ever After High was a rebel, it still wouldn't be enough. Donella would fix whatever was wrong with the Storybook, Raven Queen would sign (someone would get her to do it, whether or not going 'poof' was a thing), and everyone else would face the same choice. Those with destinies would keep their stories going. This conflict was over, even if no one else knew it yet.

Hugo knew, because it was *his fault*.

He'd told Donella that Varian had Ulla's notes, that he planned to use them somehow, someday. He did it because she could tell he knew something he wasn't telling her about. But that was giving him too much credit. He could've lied. He was good at that.

No, he did it to get back into her good graces.

All the good it did.

If he'd kept his promise to keep the research a secret, Varian might've gotten away with depowering the Storybook of Legends. Hugo could've helped him. In the dead of night, making sure it wouldn't trace back to either of them. Don wouldn't have *known* he found Ulla's research. Varian could've lived the life he wanted in a world that never called him Dorothy again, and...

"Either the Storybook is capable of being de-powered, and no one gets a story, or it stays as it is. There is no middle ground. You'll see."

And Hugo would've had nothing. No destiny, no security, nothing he'd spent his life working toward. And that, resentfully, sickeningly, gave him pause.

Did it give him pause anymore?

No.

Why would it? Hugo had no destiny. Nevermore could he lie to himself, oh so painfully string himself along, claiming otherwise. So, why not help his dearest friend? Better late than never. What did he have to lose?

He had *Varian* to lose, that's what.

Donella would know it was him. Even if he wasn't the one doing it, if *Hugo* did the dirty work all on his own (as he always did) she'd know he knew how because of Varian. Consequently, enemies, powerful, royal, blessed by destiny, would be reaped. Hugo knew what she was like on a vendetta. Neither of them wouldn't escape.

All problems that wouldn't exist if it weren't for *Hugo*.

On the counter, Olivia rested herself on his shaking hand.

At least Varian's heart wasn't heavy tonight. He could enjoy this True Hearts Day holiday to its fullest. The dance hadn't been found out and shut down.

How much longer could Hugo keep himself together? If the mirror was anything to go by, not long.

Three things happened at once:

The lights went out. The music no longer echoed through the wall.

One word echoed through Hugo's mind, vicious and panicked.

Caught.

"So he didn't actually *say* he was doing it for anyone in particular?" Varian stressed over the blaring music.

"No," Briar sighed, inching away. "But *I'm* telling you, Cupid—"

In a flash (or lack thereof), the lights went out. The music stopped. The party came to a grinding halt.

"Shit," Ashlynn was the first to run out, followed closely by Briar. Varian, however, stayed where he was.

Confused, quiet murmurs (as quiet as murmurs could be in place as packed as this) sprouted up. Mirrorphone flashlights shone, acting like lighthouses in the sea-like crowd. They barely made a dent in the darkness. Taking out his device, Varian shot a quick text to his friends, which included Hugo, letting them know of his whereabouts.

Bursting out of the powder room, Hugo combed the darkness, peppered by cold white lights; flashlights from mirrorphones. He patted his sides, searching for his own, finding nothing. *Shit.* It was in his jacket. The jacket that got temporarily magic-ed out of existence to make this one-night-outfit possible. He'd remembered to take Olivia out beforehand, but not his mirrorphone. Cause of *course* he would. *Stupid.*

Speaking of: being the smartest girl ever, the robotic mouse crawled out from his pocket, turning on her own little flashlight eyes.

The best and brightest of friends. Hugo had the sense to think as his panic grew.

He needed to stay calm. If the party was getting shut down, they needed to leave. But he wasn't leaving without Varian.

Is he still in that paper-hearts room? He headed back before he finished the thought. At the same time, he hoped his ears were tricking him when he swore the volume of voices got louder.

The ballroom was definitely getting louder. Shouting names, trying to find friends, all attempting to be heard over one another. Without the music to blanket it, the noise was almost unsettling.

According to the groupchat, the others were at the larger refreshments tables. Good. It'd be best if none of them got caught in the growing chaos. All but one had texted back. No reply from Hugo. *Did he bring his mirrorphone?*

Scanning the party from the doorless entryway, Varian frowned. *He shouldn't be alone.*

Without thinking of himself, he decided to brave the crowd, trudging in the general direction Hugo had gone. Though, with how dark everything was, they might pass each other without knowing.

There were plenty of people in the paper hearts room, escaping the restless mass of people in the main area, but none of them were Varian.

"Varian?" Another voice shouted.

Nuru, peeking into the side-room, noticed him instead. "Have you seen Varian? He said he was here."

"No," Hugo approached, finding that Eugene was with her. "I'm looking for him."

"You weren't with him?!"

"Briefly."

"Great timing," Eugene sighed.

Hugo huffed. "I'm searching now."

"Well, search faster!" Nuru headed in a different direction with him. "I don't like the look of this."

Hugo couldn't agree more. With nothing else to say, he returned to the sea (of people). Shouts grew exponentially, now saying more than names:

"Is the party done?"

"Should we get out of here?"

"Seriously, how long does it take to fix the lights!"

This made it difficult to hear if anyone was calling for him as he journeyed back out.

"Hugo?"

Varian peaked into what he could reasonably assume was the powder room. No working lights, same as the rest of the basement. No Hugo either.

Though, he did find someone else, a few feet down from the door.

Ashlynn and Briar, standing in front of an open fuse-box, many other students in their proximity watching with bated breath.

Varian waved to them. "Anything I can do to help?"

Ashlynn shook her head, focused.

Best to leave them to it.

Thinking back to it, Hugo might've returned to the side room. He should've waited—

"Careful!" C.A. Cupid said, brushing him off. "Oh, you!"

"Me?"

"I passed your roommate!" She pointed a thumb back to the main rabble, before rushing to Ashlynn and Briar's side. Another shout from said rabble. They said something quick and quiet to Briar, who ran off a split second later.

Hugo shouldn't act frazzled. That would make things worse. Even in the most perilous jobs, where everything would fall apart, he didn't let himself get like this. But in those cases, he was tasked with finding objects, magical trinkets, and the like. This was different. Varian was better than all of them combined, and he didn't want one of his last nights of blissful ignorance ending in trouble.

In the chaos around them, voices overlapping, one voice rose higher than any other. It sounded like they said, "... Grimm..." followed by words like "detention", "professors", and worst of all "caught". Hearsay, as it was too dark and loud to confirm much of anything, but it spread fast anyway. If Hugo was the only one really panicking before, well, now he wasn't.

People moved this way and that, going from concerned to desperate to get going.

Shoulders were checked, shoves received without thought, everyone trying to get past everyone, and Hugo found he was encountering literally everyone at this doomed dance except the person he wanted—

A hand brushed his.

“Hugo!”

Varian shouted his name, tried to grab him, but the strong current of the dense and panicked crowd took him away.

No sooner had he almost gotten hold of his hand had he been knocked back by a passing partygoer.

A shot in the dark, Hugo reached out.

Holding tight, hand in hand, they pulled each other close.

With everyone shoving and shouting so close to each other, staying together required all but hugging. That wouldn’t have been (as much of) a problem for Varian any other night. But not tonight, and certainly not finding out—

“We should get out of here,” Hugo said.

Snapping out of his trance, even in this flashlight-lit darkness Varian could see how pale Hugo looked. Sure, he was always pale, but now he looked ghostly. He was still holding his hand firmly. *Is he scared?* If Varian didn’t know better, he might’ve wrinkled his nose in surprise. But he did know better. *Reminder: Thank Briar Beauty later.*

“It’s fine,” Varian assured, squeezing his hand back, capturing his gaze. “The problem is with—”

In the distance, at the top of the spiral staircase, a shimmering array of blue magic shot out, lighting up the room before fizzling into nothing.

“Everyone!” Briar stood there, megaphone in hand, as Farrah sent out another round of blue dust into the air above. “No one is shutting this dance down! We just used too much power!”

“My bad!” The DJ (*Melody Piper*. Varian recalled) shouted back to her, voice distant and microphone-less.

“Ashlynn and Cupid are checking the fuse-box,” Briar assured. “We’re gonna get this fixed, so calm down—”

Suddenly, music from the DJ’s many-wired set up blared, sending a jolt of life through the entire party. Cheers nearly drowned out the music, the masses relaxing around them, ceasing their traffic jam to the exit, spreading out at long last. Still no lights, but a good sign nonetheless.

Hugo let out an unmistakable sigh of relief. The hand in his eased up, and it was with great disappointment that Varian could record a terrible realization: Varian didn't want it to.

So much for microdosing.

He really needed to stop letting these feelings run rampant. After tonight, he was putting this crush away. Really.

Really really.

Really *really* really.

...

Really?

"Someone special."

The mere suggestion, implication, possibility that Hugo might reciprocate left Varian ready to scream his feelings from the rooftops— and that was very *very* dangerous, because it was just that: Mere.

Varian was too good a scientist not to at least *look into* C.A. Cupid's hypothesis.

Speaking of, a flapping of wings echoed from above. Cupid landed atop the spiral stairs, whispering something to Briar, who then said right into the megaphone.

"The lights switch isn't working?"

She laughed, though it wasn't funny.

Hugo didn't need to look at his roommate to know he was staring.

"I'm not gonna help with that."

"Why not?" Varian's bewildered expression could be heard. "You're a mechanic."

"Self-taught," he reminded, like it was a detriment.

"You say this, foolishly, to the self-taught alchemist?"

Varian looked unfairly, happily, smug.

"Okay, let's say I am," Hugo relented. "Let's assume, consequently, I *already know* what their problem is." *Cause I do know.* He pointed up to the ceiling, mercifully covered in shadows. "The surge that initially took out the power must've overloaded the lights' circuitry. We're lucky the others didn't fry, but not *that* lucky. It'll take more than flipping a switch to fix it. Someone will need gear, supplies, access to the wires themselves. All things I can't get at in the middle of a party."

Varian hummed. “So, assuming all that is true, what would you, the assumed mechanic in this assumed scenario, assumedly suggest?”

“You’re not being subtle.”

“Good.”

Hobby-level interest in mechanics or not, destiny or not, he was trained to look to one thing for a solution. Not that he could use it now, with his Sorcerer’s Apprentice bookmark-like (not actually a bookmark, of course. Those were exclusively for successors related to their predecessors, i.e. everyone but Hugo) curse.

The unavailable answer: Magic.

Thankfully, he wasn’t the only one with this mindset.

Across the room, a burst of glittering magic caught all of their attentions, like a firework. From it rose a familiar ball of light, a shooting star, gifting the room with a sparkling trail of magic in her wake.

“Nuru!” Varian brightened.

From another corner, a figure buzzed into the air, igniting black and blue flames (though none of them seemed to spread or cause any destruction) mid-air. As she flew by, she muttered something that sounded like, “The one party I’ve ever been invited to is *not* ending in a blackout. No way.” Her flames acted like black-lights.

Elsewhere, a swirling of purple, powerful enough to be witnessed and *felt* everywhere in the ballroom, began to spread across the room.

“Yay!” A voice near them exclaimed. Madeline Hatter, wearing a silly (to put it extraordinary lightly) party hat. “That’s my best friend!” At the same time, the future Mad Hatter went rooting around her hat, pulling from it dozens of glow sticks, which she threw into the crowd with reckless abandon.

Then, the purple glimmer fizzed and flustered, going wrong, before disappearing entirely, taking its palpable energy with it.

“Whoops. Guess that counted as too “goodly” for her magic’s liking.” Maddie squeaked, disappearing into the semi-darkness.

Flying just as high, Farrah had finally left the balcony, raining shimmering dust on the dance attendees, giving everyone’s outfits a temporary gleam. She passed Nuru. Onlookers could almost hear her giggling in her strange, starry form.

Awestruck was a fair term for what Hugo felt. Favoritism for mechanics aside, magic inspired that in him. That, and anticipation. There was someone else he wanted to see in action.

“You should get to work, Goggles.”

Varian blinked up at him, incredulous, stupidly hesitant, furiously so.

That's not fair. It wasn't that Hugo didn't want to help. Goodness knows he didn't need another tick on his uselessness record. But what did Varian expect him to do? He couldn't do any magic beyond the basics without it getting out of hand. And sure, the Sorcerer's Apprentice was destined to grasp beyond what's expected of themselves, for better or worse, but Hugo wasn't that person. He never would be.

"Not much I can do without my glove—"

"The metal one?" Maddie reappeared (as if out of thin air). Not waiting for an answer, she took off her cutesy party hat, rooting through its depths. Despite the relative darkness of the ballroom, it was obvious that her arm should *not* have been able to reach that deeply into that hat. Nor should she have been able to pull out a roughly half-arm length metal glove from said hat.

"This one, right?"

But she didn't stop there! She also pulled out a whole ass bag, looking very familiar to Hugo — because it was *his*.

"Supplies! The Narrator said you'd need those."

Silently gasping like a fish out of water, terrified to ask where, when, *how*??? Hugo slowly took the items from the future Mad Hatter.

With a crack of his ungloved hands, Varian, giddy, declared: "Let's get to work!"

Light magic. In a word: tricky.

Photons act paradoxically. It was not an uncommon tendency for inexperienced magic users to create disappearing rays, unstable fire, and explosions. A certain kid-friend of Varian's had that problem. As did Varian himself, once upon a time. There wasn't a standardized, simple spell that could create light. Light spells had to be personalized.

Magic was all about intent. The difficulty lay in quieting the mind, allowing that intent to crystalize. To allow oneself to believe the impossible is possible. This was easier with a set method. Thus, the problem with light: both wave and particle, personalized and capable of coming from any magician willing to make it so.

That was why the results of these spells appeared different from magician to witch, fairy to future Evil Queen, sorcerer to alchemist. This next-in-line Dorothy, trained in more magic than a Dorothy ever should be, had his own way of making light.

All this to say, Varian *could* cast his own light spell. HOWEVER... including alchemy (and his roommate) was more fun.

"We should make something small," Hugo explained, checking supplies. "That's what the glove, in its current state, can most efficiently handle. Small multiples."

Varian nodded, picking a phosphorescence vial, pointing it in Hugo's face. "We need something luminous and light. Literally light, as in mass."

"Replicable."

“Clean.”

Then they had the same idea, at the same time, saying it all at once: “Bubbles!”

Varian beamed. “Whimsical.”

They dug for the chemicals and magical substances needed. Varian debated in his head. “Combine this with...”

Hugo beat him to the punch, searching and finding, “This?”

“And this,” Varian loaded one into the glove, as Hugo added the other.

“Light as they are, they’ll still be semi-liquid. If it was gas I could get them floating but—”

“Anti-gravity spell.”

“Can you do that?”

“Like you need to ask,” Varian grabbed another vial, a kaleidoscope of colors inside, handing it to his roommate, who gave him a questioning look. He explained, “Making them multicolored.”

“Is it necessary?”

“None of this is.”

“And you’re sure it won’t blow up the whole thing?”

“I’m 85% sure it won’t blow up the whole thing.”

Hugo locked it into the glove.

The chemicals created the compound, Hugo formed the glowing multicolored bubbles with his glove, and Varian cast the spell to keep them afloat longer than a normal one would. Quicker than quick, they found their rhythm.

As the room got brighter and brighter with the collective effort of magically destined students, future saviors, stars, villains, and roommates, music blared around them. It was easy to get lost in their work, in each other.

It was like a dance, drifting from one corner of the room to the other, leaving these creations of alchemy and magic and mechanics in their wake. They wouldn’t last forever, that much was certain. Eventually, the anti-gravity spell would fade, the orbs would shrink, dissipate, float to the floor and pop. That wouldn’t happen until the night was over. One night was all they needed.

“Wicked,” the future villain endorsed, passing by Varian and Hugo, still attempting to work her magic and do some good (something her own bookmark regularly prevented). She wasn’t the last to compliment them. Though the vast majority of students in the vicinity were busy getting back to dancing, making up for time lost in the blackout, it was hard for anyone to miss the shining work of the magical students, roommates included. When Nuru reverted from her star form, landing, she offered them a thumbs up before twirling away, pleased as punch. Occasionally strangers threw out words of affirmation, thanks, little comments and reactions, their voices gilding across the melding music and movement.

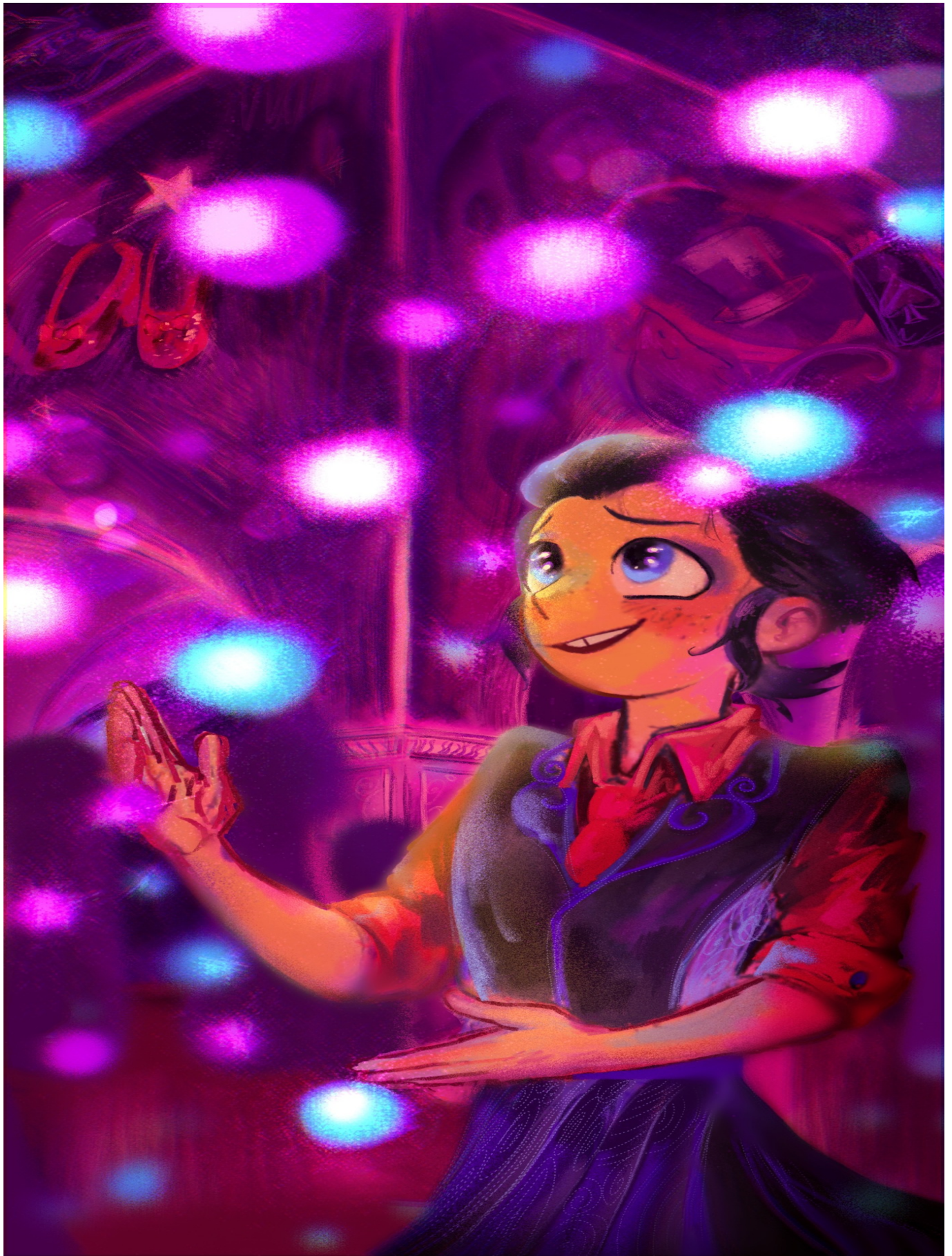
Varian was tickled pink by it all.

Unconcerned with the opinions of others (save for certain people), Hugo accepted the kind words with a seemingly unaffected air. Varian tried to do the same, though his unfamiliarity with being publicly praised for alchemy, magic, science, etc, left him unsure what else to do but smile.

Regardless, their praise wasn't the best part of all this in Varian's eyes.

Soon, the ballroom was filled with rays of soft reds, pinks, purples, and blues. A lot of blues, actually. All spirling and wonderful.

It was truly a sight.



Still not the best part.

“I must say, despite most of this being thanks to my glove,” Hugo said, a touch less smug than he usually was. “You’re being remarkably helpful.”

Varian rolled his eyes. “I would say the same for you, if I didn’t dread that you’d hold it over my head.”

In place of a clever jab, Hugo simply hovered his free hand above Varian, about where his goggles would usually rest. He got the message: *“Not difficult to hold things over your head.”*

Furious laughter escaped Varian, joyous and free.

The best part? Much to his vexation, his mortification, his startling lack of any real surprise, the best part was the glow in his heart. The sweet understanding that he didn’t want these feelings to fade. In fact, he’d be disappointed if they did.

Varian liked Hugo. He really did.

And, with the words of a very pink princess floating through his head, he wanted more than anything to know if Hugo felt the same.

“Think that’s enough?” Hugo held the last one in his glove.

Up toward the ceiling, illuminating the paintings, countless bubbles floated. Some forming cloud-like structures. From each of them, multicolored light emitted from small orbs, some clustered together like clouds. They, combined with the other magical students' efforts, left the ballroom aglow (by party standards).

Varian nodded, bringing his hands to the small source of light, adding one last anti-gravity spell and sending it away. If, in doing so, he brought himself closer to his roommate than he needed to, well, that’d be okay. When he looked back at him with those glittering green eyes, it was more than okay. He might never look away.

But Hugo did. He watched the bubble find its way up and up, where it perfectly illuminated another one of the ceiling paintings. This one, a broom surrounded by three magic sparkles.

“My cue!” Madeline appeared as if out of thin air, again. Reluctantly, Hugo unloaded the vials from his glove, slotting them away before handing everything to her. With a giggle, she stored them into her reality-defying hat before placing it back on her head and skipped away.

“Very trustful of you,” Varian praised.

“More like too terrified to wanna know more,” Hugo shrugged, staring up once more. “Ignorance is bliss, right?”

Right. That was Varian’s initial point of indulging his feelings, wasn’t it? To distract himself from his own lack of ignorant bliss? From the good and bad news he desperately wished was only good. Good, with no horrific implications that clawed at him even now.

The music settled down, switching between songs. Varian took a breath, then another, soothed by the lull. He wasn’t sure how long he could stand all the noise, jostling around, and general chaos of the dance without becoming overstimulated, but for the time being he felt all right. Alchemy made

it easier, as did his friends, as did Hugo's presence, as much of a double edged sword it could be. He wanted Hugo to feel all right too.

Later. He reminded himself. He's having fun. He doesn't need an emotionally draining deep-dive discussion on how the Storybook—

"Glad I could be useful," Hugo said without prompting.

"You always are," Varian chuckled, grateful, thoughts clawing up, speaking without thinking. "Maybe it's a Sorcerer's Apprentice thing."

Oh no.

More intensely than ever before, Hugo froze. Varian noticed; how could he not?

"I'm not the Sorcerer's Apprentice."

If that was meant to be biting, it wasn't. So foreign, so unreal was his voice in that moment that Varian struggled to recognize the student before him. This wasn't Hugo talking. This was someone in a corner. "I'm done deluding myself. It's not going to happen. She," *The Sorcerer*, "she won't talk to me."

Cold, icy horror shut Varian down. *How long has he been this defeated? How did I not see it? All that talk of 'Later', 'Later', all the while he's needed to hear exactly what I know to be—*

"Why would she let me be the next Sorcerer's Apprentice?" Hugo bit out.

"Because you're the Sorcerer's Apprentice."

A joyless laugh escaped him. "That's a nice thought. He adjusted his glasses, swiping at his eyes underneath. "It doesn't matter. It doesn't," taking a shaking breath, a trepidatious resolve overtook Hugo's features. "Goggles, I gotta tell you— Hey!"

Varian dragged him away, beelining for the other side-room; not the one with paper hearts, but the one with stairs.

No more 'later'. Good and bad. He needs to hear this. Now.

"We need to talk," he slowed, collecting himself. "We need to talk about the research notes."

Standing on the patio-like space atop this tower (because of course this royal store had a goddamn tower; *two* actually), the refreshing quality of the cold air didn't last longer than a moment. On the way up, Hugo had taken note of the handful of partygoers lounging on the steps, taking a break from dancing, talking about this and that (he heard a few discussing Ashlynn Ella, and some controversial dating decision she'd recently made). Most of all, they were enjoying the spurts of cool air when anyone opened the hatch above. Their sighs could be heard when Varian and Hugo went up and out. It seemed the best way of enjoying the drop in temperature. Standing it in, however, was not refreshing nor enjoyable.

What he wouldn't give to just go back inside? Unfortunately, rather than go searching for their coats, Varian cast a small warmth spell in their immediate proximity, alleviating the one problem he

might leverage to delay this conversation. It would be a redundant one, that much was certain.

“Either the Storybook is capable of being de-powered, and no one gets a story, or it stays as it is. There is no middle ground. You’ll see.”

Donella’s voice filled his head before Varian’s had a chance. Bracing him, shielding him, readying him for the blow.

Hugo leaned against the tower’s balustrade.

“You’ll see.”

“Already Goggles, hit me.” He tried to sound bored. The cold night air sent a sharp chill through his lungs as he spoke. “What did the notes say?”

“You’ll see.”

Even with the hatch closed, the music from inside echoed like a heartbeat. Or perhaps that was Hugo’s heart, rattling, cracking his ribs.

“You’ll see.”

“She was wrong about bookmarks.”

What.

“My mom,” Varian clarified, “she was wrong. That’s what she wrote about in the penultimate pages. Revising her conclusion on bookmarks.”

That wasn’t what he was supposed to say.

Hugo didn’t believe him. That must’ve been obvious. Varian, his brows pinched, his mouth a tight line, took out and opened his mirrorphone, handing it to his roommate. “It would be better for you to read it yourself,” he said, voice balancing on a knife’s edge. Hugo took the device. On the screen, a photo of paper on a desk; the decoded notes.

I was wrong about bookmarks.

They are not genetic, passed down as a result of fairytale generations using magic/being cursed in very narrow ways over and over again. They are warnings.

The Storybook itself throws them at successors to let them know: ‘This is your destiny. You’re up next! Good luck!’ It doesn’t matter whether any successor is related by blood to their predecessor. All that matters is whether they have their specific bookmark (it can be small or painfully unignorable).

Not only will the Storybook accept that person, they’re the only one the book will accept for that destiny.

Hugo might as well have blacked out right there and then. How else does one react to that?

After a lifetime of *knowing* his future never could be a sure thing. Knowing that until he signed that dusty old Storybook it could be taken away on a whim. He wasn’t Donella’s successor by blood,

but the spot was open, so he could take it, if she allowed him. That's what she told him. The public and the school would believe him to be her son, for that's what they deemed a successor must be. In reality, they both knew she could toss him aside whenever she liked and find someone else to be the Sorcerer's Apprentice, should he fail her enough (which he did).

So, once more it must be asked: how does one react to that kind?

To be told (via the written word), suddenly, without preamble, that all those things you *know* about the precarious nature of your future... were wrong.

Denial is a good place to start.

Ulla could be wrong. Hugo thought, not without reason.

Why should he believe any of this? What sway should the words of a dead woman have over him? *Donella* told him how bookmarks worked. Previously, Ulla's notes supported her claim. Sure, she changed her mind, but with what proof?

"Did she offer any evidence for this?"

"How much evidence can she get when she's doing this illegally?!"

Hugo rolled his eyes. "She didn't even offer any reasoning behind—"

"Did you finish reading that page?"

The next line:

So, *how* does the Storybook decide who gets these bookmarks (and differentiates who gets what bookmark)? Why have I come to this conclusion? I'll explain my reasoning.

Shit. "No."

Not making eye-contact, Varian blurted out. "Read the whole thing!"

Ignoring how foolish he felt (and how bossy Varian was being), Hugo did keep reading.

I started to rethink my initial conclusion when I found, remarkably, a recent case of (two) adopted successors to a fairytale "villain" I was briefly acquainted with. Their predecessor never expected them to succeed her. She took them in as a kindness, nothing more. In fact, she informed me (through paper communications; I can't exactly visit her, stuck at home as I am, right?) that she planned never to have children of her own, not wanting to subject anyone to her sister's fate; the fate she herself narrowly avoided.

AND YET. Despite having no relation to these girls, after less than a year of being adopted they showed undeniable signs of the bookmark she and her own sister possessed for as long as they could remember. And I do mean undeniable. It ain't every day that skin starts turning green!

I questioned her, demanding every detail she was willing to provide. They weren't related to her, that much she knew for certain, so what could have caused this? Eventually, I found what I believe to be the answer:

A few weeks prior, she caught them calling themselves witches with absolute conviction. They believed themselves to be the next wicked witches, by virtue of their adoptive mother, even though she told them it wasn't possible. Well, they believed it anyway. Then, right before the bookmarks appeared, this "villain" entertained the idea; privately, but with more seriousness than she'd ever previously afforded the notion. Within the minute they had green skin, and still do.

The answer is so simple that its causality has (rather predictably in this incurious societal system we ascribe to) gone unnoticed!

Magic is all about intent. Example: True Love's Kiss! Magic factors in how two people see each other, how they feel about each other, even if they themselves don't yet realize it. The Storybook is similar. First and foremost, it recognizes intent in its predecessors; those already tied permanently to it.

Who these predecessors see as their successors is (more than) halfway toward having a bookmark. The other half: the successor viewing themselves that way.

That doesn't mean either of them have to like it. Since the widely accepted logic of our world is that being the children of fairytale characters automatically makes you a successor, this step happens without anyone being the wiser. They are told "this is going to happen" and without knowing there's an alternative, they believe it. I can only assume there'd be far more chaos around who becomes a successor without that widespread belief.

For the more open-minded, or those without someone taking that spot right away, there is an actual decision to be made. Just as this "villain" chose without realizing.

In spite of this "villain" vehemently changing her mind, her girls' bookmarks haven't gone away. My conclusion: the viewership-rule is required initially, but not the whole way to the Storybook. The stars only have to align between predecessor and successor once.

Of course, with my conclusions coming from first-hand accounts and extremely (to put it lightly) limited data, there is a fair bit of speculation involved here. For now, that's the best I can hope to obtain.

Oh, the roadblocks of illegal research.

Okay, so she had a lot of reasoning behind this conclusion. Hugo thought. A dizzying amount of reasoning. "Why didn't you show me this sooner?" He didn't sound upset. He wasn't even sure if he was upset. He wasn't sure what to call the emotion clogging his voice.

For a moment, Varian said nothing. Then, his voice a void, he simply said, "There's more."

Right. Hugo tensed, swiping the device to the next photo. There were two.

Mercifully shorter than the previous page, it continued on...

Expanding further, the existence of an "only" person capable of signing/being accepted by the Storybook, as my theory suggests, implies the existence of a "wrong" person. When I say "wrong" person, I am referring to anyone and everyone without the bookmark for a particular destiny.

What would happen if they signed instead?

Testing could answer that. Though, as very very interested as I am in the matter, I suppose the dangers are too great to attempt such a thing. The results could be benign, a straightforward rejection as a simple closing a page, or as deadly as... well, death. Or disappearance. “Going poof” as the Headmaster has phrased it, or so I’ve heard.

I think a better term would be “eaten alive.” Cause they’re not actually going missing. Missing suggests they are somewhere, alive or dead, just not here. What the Storybook (likely) does, is not that. It’s consuming. There’s no body to find! So, yeah, “eaten alive.” Isn’t magic wonderful?

Anywho, once someone has their bookmark, they’re as good as gold. I’ve yet to find any instance of successors being swapped out. I can’t even find examples of successors dying, or anything of that sort, and being replaced. Perhaps that’s because they’ve been marked by the Storybook. Bookmarks could be a warning and protective spell, all in one, keeping them unscathed all the way to their inevitable signing. But that’s speculation. More data is needed. Not that I’ll ever get it.

Once again, oh, the roadblocks of illegal research.

The pages ended there.

Hugo kept staring. He stared far longer than he should have, far longer than anyone should need to read a half-page of writing.

“Hugo?”

“We really never found any explanation for this *curse* of mine, did we?”

“No,” Varian echoed. “We didn’t.”

Right. Then, muttering, the words barely escaping his throat, Hugo made a request. “I’m gonna need you to put out a fire.”

Varian didn’t have time to respond before Hugo summoned a light in his palm using his own magic. Green and silver. Personalized. A beat passed. Then that light began to grow, heat intensifying, dancing wider, less controlled, all without its summoner doing anything to cause such rapid instability. Hugo couldn’t stop it, but he could feel it closing in on him. Until it didn’t, with Varian suffocating every photon with a summon of icy water.

That proved one thing. His curse was still active. No, not curse. Bookmark; and if a bookmark is a warning, perhaps he should hear it.

“Don’t do that again,” Varian said, one hand on the balustrade, one on his own chest, settling from fright. “Please.”

“You were right,” Hugo enunciated.

Varian’s expression softened. They both knew what he meant.

“I’m the next Sorcerer’s Apprentice.”

Did Donella know about this?

No, of course not. She would have said if she did, for so many reasons, his safety the least of them. What would she think of all this? What would she say? For years she'd told him the Storybook would accept him but it didn't need him. He could be replaced.

In a way, her words weren't inaccurate. Until recently, Hugo *was* replaceable. Now, he was safe to sign, sure, but...

"I'm the next Sorcerer's Apprentice," *and yet*, "I wasn't before."

Why didn't this manifest until recently? The example Ulla gave took less than a year. Hugo's been by Donella's side for *years*. Had the depths of his self-doubt been so monumental that it prevented this magic from setting in for that long?

Or...

No. To consider, candidly, that the Sorcerer had so little faith in him, that all the tough love was (until recently) genuine apathy was not something Hugo could bring himself to accept. In a flash, a million tiny needles poked through his brain, crafting a simple defense: *This delay was my fault*.

Between the two of them, Hugo was the one who'd changed the most recently. He was the one who believed so wholeheartedly that he wasn't going to get his destiny so easy. *He* was the one who believed, silently, for so long, that he wasn't worthy of it. It was something always out of reach.

In fact, the reason he'd changed his mind a fraction was the encouragement, foolish though it was (though, now it didn't seem so foolish) of—

"So I wasn't right," Varian hissed out. Hugo knew innately that he wasn't the target of that maliced tone. This was aimed inward.

"What?"

"Not back then. In the cooking class-ic lab, when I told you the Storybook would accept you."

A sweet memory, so seemingly distant, tainted by present revelations.

"Well," Hugo huffed. "Good thing I didn't buy it back then, huh?" He tried to make it a joke, throwing him an unaffected smile, bordering on a smirk. He was met with an unflinching stare back, guileless, terrifying, *terrified*.

"I want to think the worst that could've happened is the Storybook not opening." Varian pressed the heel of his hand to the top of his head, but not before letting it hover for a moment, as if expecting something to be there. A rare goggle-less moment for the alchemist. If Hugo had the capacity to laugh, he would have. But he couldn't, stunned by the shuttering, agonizing breath his roommate let out. "But, magic can be so dangerous."

Funnily enough, it was still sinking in for Hugo. The potential of disappearing. If all this was true, and the worst was to be assumed, had he signed on Legacy Day, before having this bookmark, he might've disappeared. Frankly, he couldn't allocate energy toward thinking about it. So, he wouldn't.

But that was Hugo. This was Varian. Varian would think about it. It would've been the first detail he really sank his teeth into; and it sank its teeth right back into him. He'd read it hours ago. Hours.

Hugo stared ahead, unable to look at his roommate.

"I hate it. It's the worst part of magic. The more powerful, the more volatile, the greater the consequences if you make a mistake, or don't know what to do, or cross some invisible line the magic doesn't like. And I don't understand why," Varian faltered, his voice taking on a fury tinge, "*why* those consequences so often end with people *disappearing*, or *threatening* to disappear, or being threatened *with* disappearing. I *hate* it."

Was Hugo the one shivering, or Varian? He sounded like he was about to cry. Somehow, he knew they weren't his first tears of the day.

"So, when I read all that, I was so relieved you didn't sign, and so glad it's safe for you to sign now, and so scared for what might've happened if you'd signed then, and so *mad* at myself for telling you "*Magic will know the truth. Simple as that.*" As if I knew anything for certain!" Varian stole a breath like he'd snatched it from the air. "Hugo, I don't know what I'd do if you d—"

Then, Hugo's vision dropped.

No, not his vision. *Hugo* dropped. His legs completely gave out beneath him.

Given this, one may assume that all this talk of disappearing had him so scared that he shut down. But that wasn't the case. The possible danger he'd faced on Legacy Day, the what-ifs, everything about his bookmark, his destiny, Donella, all of that he could handle; really he could. The good news and bad news, the retroactive terror and current relief, all of it, he could handle and stay standing.

What he couldn't handle, however, was *Varian* being relieved for *him*. For *Hugo Cast*, who'd just been told that the future he'd coveted for so long, the one that he thought he'd lost forever, was truly and wholly lined up and waiting for him. The Storybook would accept him, and only him. He was the next Sorcerer's Apprentice. The future he had envisioned for so long, at last, would be his.

But that didn't change Varian's fate in the slightest.

Varian, the one who made him believe in himself, the one who wanted everyone to live the life they wanted (even Hugo), the one who deserved better than the hand he was dealt by a longshot. The one Hugo knowingly, personally, sold out, dooming any attempts he might make to depower the Storybook. Making sure that even if he succeeded in destroying the book, Donella would know he did it, and she would make sure everyone else did too, and the consequences would be dire.

Hugo would get everything he wanted, and Varian would get nothing.

That sent Hugo to the ground. That realigned the axis of his whole world.

Come to think of it, he hadn't actually hit the ground.

Returning to his senses bit by bit, he finally processed the force, keeping him from collapsing. Varian, white knuckled (not from lack of strength) held Hugo upright.

“I’m so sorry,” Varian practically shouted in his ear. “*You* must be freaking out and *my* freaking out definitely wasn’t helping. Are you okay? No, of course you’re not okay, what am I saying?!” He spoke so quickly that he didn’t seem to be breathing. “Do you need water? Can you stand on your own? I’ll carry you inside if—”

All at once, Hugo regained the ability to move, finding his balance. The first thing he did was throw his arms around Varian, who stopped talking and properly hugged back so fast it nearly gave Hugo whiplash. Somehow, it was still Hugo who was holding too tight. “Sorry.”

Varian sighed, getting choked up again. “For what?”

Take your pick.

Unable to answer, Hugo found his own eyes watery. *When did that happen?* Brushing behind his glasses. The movement seemingly brought his roommate back to reality. Varian pulled back, squeezing his arms.

“Don’t worry about me.” Hugo laughed. “Just couldn’t let you out-shine me in the breakdown competition.”

“Is that what this is?”

“If you have to ask, then you’re losing the breakdown competition.”

Varian did jazz-hands. “It wouldn’t be a party without a breakdown,”

“That doesn’t sound right.”

“Have you been to many parties?”

“None *you’d* be invited to.”

Varian lightly punched his arm. “For the record, I swear, I didn’t want you to have to deal with a breakdown during this. I had every intention of keeping it to myself until we got back home—”

Home. Strange word for something as temporary as a school dormitory. Though it didn’t feel out of place to Hugo.

“—I should’ve...” trailing off, Varian dropped his head against his roommate’s chest.

Hugo pulled him back into an embrace. As he did, his mind returned there, to their dorm, and to what waited there. The notes, and what he knew they would say. Now, he knew it was the last page where those words waited, not the penultimate pages.

“Either the Storybook is capable of being de-powered, and no one gets a story, or it stays as it is. There is no middle ground. You’ll see.”

He knew thanks to Donella. She warned him; *told* him, point blank.

Just like she told him about bookmarks.

Wait.

Donella was wrong about bookmarks. She said they were genetic, not warnings. If Don *had* known the truth about bookmarks, she wouldn't have let Hugo walk onto the stage without one. Not in a million years.

What good would it do her?

Donella said herself that she didn't know all of Ulla's findings. This was yet another example of that. She was Ulla's research partner, yes, but she mostly acquired materials, leaving the bulk of analysis for Dorothy. She had some of her own copies, selections, but she burned them ages ago. She'd asked Hugo to relay what Varian found *specifically* to refresh her memory and fill in the gaps (as she worked to figure out what was currently wrong with the Storybook).

She *claimed* to know the ultimate conclusion of them, that the Storybook was all or nothing. "You'll see."

She'd also claimed that Hugo didn't have a bookmark. She'd been wrong.

If Donella was wrong about the bookmarks, something she claimed to know for *certain* was one thing, what if she was wrong about her other claims? What else didn't she know?

What if Donella is wrong about the Storybook being all or nothing?

"Either the Storybook is capable of being de-powered, and no one gets a story, or it stays as it is. There is no middle ground. You'll see." — What if that, the statement at the crux of all his strife, was complete bullshit. Well-meaning, factually incorrect, bullshit.

That possibility, plausible and sweet as honey, didn't just turn Hugo's world on its axis, it evaporated the laws of gravity (metaphorically, but who was he kidding? He might as well be off the ground!). Hugo and Varian might both get what they want. No becoming enemies of the Royals, no subjecting the Rebels to lives they didn't want. Finding an actual means to partially depowering the Storybook. Giving everyone a choice in deciding what kind of life their heart desired, destined or not.

Don wouldn't oppose a solution that gave *everyone* what they wanted. Why would she?

What good would it do her?

All would be right in the world, and the Sorcerer's Apprentice would be forgiven for the unforgivable choices he made when he thought he had *no* choices to make. Forgiven by—

"Hey," Varian called him down from that future he'd never considered till then. "You wanna head back in?"

Wonderful as the future was, the present wasn't so bad either. Not with those shining blue eyes looking back at him. So, more relieved for Varian than glad for himself, he replied.

"Sure," Hugo smirked. "But, you're gonna have to help me down the stairs again."

Humming, Varian took his arm. "Oh no, a fate worse than death."

"You shouldn't say that to a man with a near-death experience."

“Are we still in the breakdown competition? Because this kind of talk is how you revitalize a breakdown competition.”

Snickering, Hugo dropped the subject, but not Varian’s arm.

As they finally retreated out of the cold, away from the silence they filled with some, but not all, hard truths, the first snowflake of the season fell. The first of many.

Coming in from the cold, the glow of the ballroom never felt better. The best warmth spell couldn’t replicate that.

Varian had expected to find the same students still lounging on the steps to the tower, still enjoying spurts of cold air. He’d prepared to maneuver Hugo and himself around them. But the steps were empty of pedestrians. Instead, he found them in the doorless doorway of this side-room, their heads turned in the same direction. With rapt interest they watched the DJ’s perch across the room where Ashlynn Ella seemed to be wrapping up some big speech. “... but if writing our happily ever after means I can’t be a royal, then call me Ashlynn Ella the rebel!”

With a soft “huh,” Hugo remarked. “That explains a few things.”

“What things?”

Hugo, suddenly lost for words, waved away Varian’s question. “Later.”

His roommate made that promise twice in one night. Rest assured, Varian still wanted answers regarding all that Briar told him. In the meantime, they watched Ashlynn rush off the make-shift stage, into the arms of a student he vaguely recognized. Hunter Huntsman. He was a fellow Rebel. From how tightly they held each other, it could be concluded that the two were dating. Varian already knew that, but apparently some people didn’t.

“Guess that rumor was true,” another student whispered.

Varian and Hugo shared a mutually perplexed look. *That was a rumor?*

“Yeah, duh,” another student shot back. “This is old news.”

Another mutually perplexed look between roommates. Wow, they *really* didn’t have a finger on the pulse of student gossip.

More interestingly, across the crowd, they saw a familiar head of bleach blonde, gentle curled hair approach the (presumably) new couple. The royal among Royals, the future Snow White, Apple White. No longer at a microphone, whatever she said went unheard from this distance.

“Think our future Queen of Ever After is taking Ashlynn’s change of loyalties well?” Hugo whispered.

Then Apple, a touch of uncertainty gracing her features, managed to smile. Still, as she did, the strawberry blonde party host’s expression eased and the boy beside her brightened.

Varian didn’t plan on forgetting the princess’ words of disillusionment, and the optimism they provided, anytime soon. Everyone deserved to choose freely whether they wanted their destiny, and

the first step for all of them was understanding exactly *what* choice they wanted to make. Figuring it out was half the game. The more people who did that, the better.

“As well as she can.” Varian wasn’t foolish enough to believe the diehard Royal had changed her stance entirely. This was a truce, at best. From the way she laughed with her friend, for now, that would have to be enough.

The music started back up. Had it been off? Or, did every other song pale in comparison to this one.

It was a slow song.

Blue searched for green, and for a moment Varian was rendered speechless, finding green already searching for blue. He didn’t need a distraction any longer. The bandage had been ripped off. However, he couldn’t reverse the revelation he’d experienced earlier, as they’d created the bubbles now lighting up the ballroom.

He still wanted answers to a few questions. Some logistical, and some of the heart. Best to start with a simple one.

“Wanna dance?”

Hugo grinned, and Varian struggled not to melt. “Well, I suppose slow dancing is remarkably easy,” he glanced this way and that, lips curling slightly. “I bet even *you* couldn’t mess it up, Farm Boy.”

“That sounds like projection, Your Highness.”

Varian took his hand, intent on leading him out to the floor. Despite the warmth spell he’d cast outside, the cold air hadn’t faded from Hugo’s skin, his hand like ice. Varian’s were surely a similar temp. *Guess I’ll have to hold on till we’ve warmed.*

Surrounded by the sounds of this slow song’s shimmering violin, swaying guitars, a steady drum beat, and the welcome notes from a piano, Hugo was struck with a stark, new thought: *Survival mode is such a pain in the ass.*

It kept him alive (that was the whole point), propped him up when nothing else would, but it also clouded the mind; blocked out everything else. There is no room for *wanting* what wasn’t needed.

Hugo needed the security of his destiny: No chance of hunger, poverty, being left in the cold ever again. Living, working, with the Sorcerer, food on the table, a place to sleep, remedied this feeling, to an extent, but none of it felt secure. Donella made sure to remind him of that every chance she got. Everyday, he *earned* what he got.

When he did finally go to school, after being homeschooled the majority of his time with her, not much changed. Still had food on the table, a place to sleep, but none of it felt secure. He did odd jobs for Don. Thefts, deliveries, earning every additional day. Still no signature in the Storybook, so all of it could go away on a whim. A constant, boiling truth. Then this year, living with Varian, trying not to get involved, becoming friends anyway. The boiling became a simmer. Still burning, just quieter. Clawing closer and closer to Legacy Day, it cooled down.

Well, Legacy Day was a disaster, and that set the tone for everything after. Don covering for his blundered theft in the library, not being trusted for jobs, his curse— *bookmark* — the Sorcerer’s silent treatment, then, mere hours ago, being ignored right to his face. On some level, for as long as he could remember, Hugo never left survival mode. Not for a single second. So, coming to the conclusion that it was all for nought, nothing to be done... he wasn’t getting his destiny. Well, survival mode couldn’t survive all that.

Luckily, it didn’t need to. Hugo didn’t need to earn it anymore. He had a bookmark, and that meant the Storybook was waiting for *him*, the *next* Sorcerer’s Apprentice, the *only* one there was. So now, he wasn’t in survival mode. Needless to say, Hugo had no idea how to proceed.

For the first time, he could exist in a world where he’d securely (or nearly secured) everything he needed.

What about wanted?

“So,” Varian started, gesturing generally with one hand, the one that wasn’t on Hugo’s shoulder, to the whole True Hearts Day dance, “you helped out with this?”

Hugo adjusted his hold on his roommate’s side. Unlike when he’d pulled him into a dance in their room, rushed and joking, meant to infuriate, this was a quieter embrace. It was hard to focus on anything else. “You heard about that?”

“Yes. *And* I heard you enlisting our friends in the cause,” Varian pointed right between his glasses. “Talk.”

With a great sigh, Hugo re-clasped their hands, explaining himself. “The planning committee was hopeless.” Speak of the devil, he caught a glimpse of Cupid, the most tolerable of the true hearts trio, standing by the food and drinks. She gave him a thumbs up (for some reason). “Especially the royals.”

“Oh, what utter suffering you must’ve endured.” Varian let his sarcasm be known.

“Goggles, please, let’s be realistic. I may have my problems with the rich and pompous, but I’m not so frail that interacting for extended periods would qualify as something I ‘suffer’ through. That’s a highly dramatic assessment of—”

“You were in agony, weren’t you?”

“Yes.”

Varian hummed, clearly trying to suppress a laugh. “I’m compelled to point out the irony of you technically being a royal—”

“By *school* definitions. That wouldn’t hold up in court.”

“Argue by appeal to authority? Very hypocritical, *Your Highness*.”

“Every word I’m saying is carving that ‘your highness’ nickname into my tombstone, isn’t it?”

Varian failed to continue suppressing his laughter. Setting aside his annoyance, Hugo understood the humor. Imagining himself working so closely with royalty of his own volition did seem outlandish. That didn’t mean he had to take it lying down.

Actually, that's exactly what he should do!

Hugo leaned back, forcing himself into a dip, spurring a yelp from his roommate. Pleased with himself, he spoke like nothing was amiss. "Your friends helped too. A saving grace if ever there was one. Remind me to thank them eventually."

"I will not," Varian yanked him back up, pouting. "I'm still pissed that they didn't tell me about it! I'm pissed at *you too* for not asking for my help!"

"You were busy! Decidedly so. Plus it was painfully time consuming. You weren't missing anything."

Varian paused. "I still would've helped."

His hand was squeezed.

"Next time," Hugo agreed. "I'll be sure to include you in my most detestable, tedious tasks." Varian unclasped their hands, swatting his arm and re-clasping their hands in the same breath. Still Hugo smiled. "I mean it. I will."

"I know," Varian was satisfied.

On the subject of their hands, specifically his roommates', they were as Hugo imagined them: calloused and uneven. In other words: lovely. If holding them in the blackout hadn't confirmed this to be the best description, then feeling them now, when the world was calm and his heart could savor the details, definitely confirmed it.

The slow song seemed to go on and on. That wasn't a complaint. For all his teasing, slow dancing was easy, as he claimed it would be. "Remarkably" easy. The kind of easy that Hugo didn't like to think about; the kind he didn't dare convince himself could last.

"Why?" His eyes flickered down. His roommate's face was scrunched up, gears turning. "Why did you help out?" Varian clarified.

A detailed, carefully laid out answer appear in his mind:

"Like I said, totally helpless. They were definitely going to get caught and this whole thing would've been dead on arrival." Then Hugo would slap on his most brilliant, self assured smirk. "I couldn't just stand by and let their incompetence ruin this ambition. Trust me, my expertise in getting away with shit, and he wouldn't specify what that meant, was much needed. I was almost-happy to assist." Then Varian would roll his eyes, or laugh, or poke fun at him for being purposefully egotistical, and that would be that.

But Hugo couldn't get those words out. He was hopelessly unprepared for the way Varian was looking at him. Like the answer was of the greatest importance. So, he said the only thing he could. The truth.

"I didn't want you to miss out on this."

Varian cracked a smile, his face awash with color, likely as a result of their glowing surroundings. Hugo's seen him smile before. He'd seen it tonight. But this was something else entirely.

And that feeling that came with it, the warmth, the rush, the simultaneous nerves and *ease* ... he wanted to call it new, fresh like a wound, but it wasn't *new*. Not really. It was everywhere: their dorm, shared classes, meals, proximity both forced and chosen, more recently in that ridiculous(ly fun) Finders Keepers game, and now at this sickeningly sweet dance. Arguably as far back as their first encounter, Varian barging into their shared dorm, furious and accusatory (and cute) Hugo was constantly ambushed by this feeling he couldn't begin to quantify.

He couldn't quantify it. Cause he was in survival mode. He was in it all the time, without effort. Varian was a distraction from it because he didn't fit into that equation, but his pull was never permanent. *This feeling* always got sidelined. Everything revolved around earning, fighting, *deserving* his destiny.

Now that was all over. The Storybook saw him. Needs were as good as met.

So, what. did. Hugo. *want*?

Then, without warning, Varian pulled him as close as he could before hiding his face beneath Hugo's chin. "I would've been more disappointed to miss spending time with you," a sigh rumbled against him. "I'm glad you're here with me, Hugo."

Oh.

Oh.

"Shit."

He knew what he wanted. He saw it all like a vision, fully-formed, perfectly fitting into the future he's always dreamed of. So perfect, in fact, that its previous absence seemed a gross injustice; a disruption to any contentedness Hugo stood to gain.

When this future Sorcerer's Apprentice, and eventually Sorcerer, lived out his destiny, he wanted a certain smart, short, oh-so-easy-to-get-a-rise-out-of roommate, who'd always be free to go where his alchemical heart pleased, when he pleased, to lend his talents from time to time, and his heart all the time. After all, Hugo would owe him quite a great deal if he could get both our hearts desires, one life of destiny and one life without, to come true. There was still hope for that dream. There was still room in his life for Varian.

"Shit, what? What?" Varian sputtered. What's up?"

Before he could answer, since he did have an answer (he did not), the song playing went from fading out to pausing all at once. A tapping of the DJ's microphone caught the attention of both roommates' (and the rest of the ballroom), followed by an 'ahem' like a windchime, and Ashlynn Ella's voice.

"Hi everyone! It's almost midnight, and not to be a buzzkill, but I'm gonna be the last one here, locking up—"

The microphone moved, then Briar's voice, yawning, said, "And I have a strict sleep schedule."

"And—" movement again, then Farrah speaking, "everyone's outfits are gonna look how they did before I helped when the clock strikes twelve."

Guess she did come down and take part in the party. Hugo mused. *Eventually.*

“So, start wrapping up.” Briar, sleepy but alert, commanded.

“Happy True Hearts Day!” Ashlynn concluded. “Oh! And happy winter break to everybody!”

Right. Hugo remembered. *Aren't we supposed to leave starting this weekend?*

In the new musiclessness, most of the partygoers, some disgruntled, some all party-ed out, began making their way out of the ballroom basement, trenching up the stone spiral staircase.

“Okay, seriously,” though Varian pulled back a little at first, he seemed to realize they were still holding each other, like they were dancing, so he pulled away completely, coughing, before continuing. “What’s up?”

In doing so, he gave Hugo a good look at the hint of his blue hairstripe, braided away but still visible in his (for once) neat hair, his myriad of freckles on tan skin, and his blue eyes. Goodness, those eyes. Plus, as previously stated, he really did clean up nice.

If Hugo had a coherent answer, now was the time to say it. Without thinking, he took back one of roommate’s hands, brushing the knuckles with his thumb. Varian’s expression stayed pinched in unmistakable confusion.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” his voice was light. His head too. “It’s just rare to see you out of your gloves, Goggles.” Of course it was rare. Varian was an alchemist, and a dedicated one at that, on top of being a scientist, magician, intelligent beyond approach, forever ready to speak his mind, kind, focused, exuberant, blindingly optimistic in a way Hugo could never—

Then, half lifting, half almost-bowing, Hugo kissed the back of Varian’s hand.

Stupor, mostly prominently, alongside a fair dose of familiar fury (the only reasonable explanation of his flushed face), immediately consumed Varian’s beautiful features.

Now, here was where Hugo knew he was screwed. Had he pulled a move like this ANY time before then he would’ve relished his roommate’s reaction, not the least bit abashed to do so. This time, however, like a cold bucket of water over his head, Hugo was bashful.

Honest to goodness *bashful*.

Before Varian could see his smugness replaced with something much more telling, Hugo dropped his hand, turning heel, heading for the stairs.

“Hey!” Varian, hot on his tail, red in the face (again, from fury and nothing else that could be explained) screeched, “what in Oz’s Great Name was *that for*?”

Hugo brought a hand to his own face, pretending to snicker behind it but really trying to will his cheeks to stop burning. He was a very pale young man, a blush would be way too obvious on him. “A gentleman always offers a gesture of thanks after a dance. Figures you wouldn’t know that, Farm Boy.”

“You’re not wearing gloves either! Where are your fingerless gloves? Where are they, Your Highness?!”

Much to the chagrin of everyone in earshot, the roommates proceeded to argue semantics all the way out of the building, barely registering the cold, the fresh snow, the ground beneath their feet, the whole trudge back to their dorm.

It wasn't until they made it there that either of them noticed both their mirrorphones buzzing with multiple messages. Varian, slightly less dazed than his roommate, read them first, turning right back around and getting his boots on.

"The others are still at the Glass Slipper! They're helping clean up."

Hugo hummed, eyes elsewhere, needing something else to do and think about. "Tedious tasks, as you requested."

Varian managed to stop himself in the doorway long enough to ask, "well?"

Of course. Hugo's presence was wanted. Wanted by Varian.

It was nearly impossible to imagine anyone feeling for another person how Hugo felt about Varian; moreover, he couldn't imagine Varian, paradoxically intelligent and idiotic as he could be, understood nor reciprocated the effect he had on his heart.

"I'll meet you there," he said, setting up the coffee/hot chocolate machine. *Cause, hey, people might want something soothing after a long night, a tiresome clean-up, and a trench in the cold.*

The answer was accepted without interrogation. With one last wave, Varian left. Other than Ruddiger and Olivia (who lept from his pocket down to her furry friend), Hugo stood alone in his shared dorm. Busying himself, he went searching for the hot chocolate powder (also planning to break out his stash of marshmallows). Finding the tin and opening it, the sight that greeted him stopped him in his tracks.

So that's where he hid the new decoded pages. Taking them out, he shook off the chocolate dust that stuck to them. Ruddiger and Olivia found that fun, playing in it as it fell. Setting the pages on the desk, an unwelcome notion occurred to him.

It's all the same right?

He did it for me.

Every step Varian took, laced with a thought.

He did it for me.

His ungloved hands, holding themselves, his thumb brushing against the back of one of them.

He did it for me.

He felt warm. No, scratch that, he felt molten.

He did it for me.

From hypotheticals to theoreticals, now Varian had evidence. Dangerous evidence. Evidence of something too wonderful to name. Too wonderful to process until he was alone, and oh, how alone he was in this dark hallway. Too wonderful to think through. Too wonderful to ignore, not when Hugo was still here, not disappeared into nothingness.

Fuck it.

Too wonderful to stop himself from turning heel. Too wonderful to think through what he wanted to say.

Upon inspection, it was all the same. Every word. Why wouldn't it be?

Varian wouldn't lie. He's not like Hugo.

Setting down the tin, Hugo tried not to let it get to him. The guilt, the shame, the *regret*. Everything might be fine. It might. That was more hope than he had at the start of the day. Donella was wrong before. He hoped she was wrong again. He hoped.

Suddenly the door opened, slamming loudly into the wall.

"Woah!" Varian exclaimed. "Sorry, that was *not* meant to be that loud," Out-of-breath in the doorway, the alchemist faltered in his approach for only a moment, before making a beeline for his roommate.

Startled, Hugo caught his breath as well. "Yeah, I should hope not! What the hell, Goggles?" He didn't even process his approach, not even when he stopped mere inches away. "You scared the shit out—"

"I love you."

Chapter End Notes

THANK YOU to my friend NART (nart-is-a-monster) for the lovely ART!!! Fun fact: Nart was the first person I saw make uncommissioned fanart of this fic! It is artistic, passionate, supportive friends like him that power fics like this into their final product. May everyone be so lucky to find friends who drive them forward like that.

On the subject of thank yous, HOLY SHIT????? WHEN THE FUCK DID A THOUSAND KUDOS HAPPEN????? I cannot believe it I actually cannot. It means the world to me that people enjoy my writing, and I hope to continue facilitating that enjoyment far into the future! Thank you!!!!!!!!!!

Let the record show that Wicked has always been an inspiration for this fic (hello "Dancing Through Life" nice to finally see you) but besides wicked, there are three other songs I've assigned this chapter.

First and foremost: "Love Is A Game" by Adele (I mentioned this one in the beginning notes).
Second: "Pure As The Driven Snow" from the Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes (and this one's been attached to this part of the story since I began planning it). Oh, and the third is "Somethin' Stupid" by Frank Sinatra and Nancy Sinatra :)

Last thing: this chapter had quite the lore dump. I intended to leave some lingering questions, and I can assure that those will be answered.

Hope you all enjoyed! Please remember to ask for help when you need it, get at least 7-8 hours of sleep when you can, and of course GO DRINK SOME WATER!!!

If Only/Only If

Chapter Summary

Hugo learns that some confessions are easier to swallow than others, especially when they're aimed at him alone.

Chapter Notes

HELLO DEAR READERS!! Y'ALL READY FOR MORE HAPPY TIMES WITH NO CHANCE OF ANGST??? Well, too bad! Cause you ain't getting that :D Hope you all enjoy this chapter!

THANK YOU to Lollygaggingloser and Nart-is-a-monster for being my beta readers this time around!!

One of the songs for the chapter (the rest will be in the ending notes): "Late Nights & Heartbreak" by Hannah Williams, the Affirmations

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Despite his hasty entrance, and hastier words, Varian didn't seem to need to catch his breath. In fact, in the silence that followed, as his words sank into the air, he didn't seem to be breathing at all. A smile remained on his face, eyes fixed on his roommate, his friend, Hugo; who, bewildered, could only exhale one word from his lungs:

"What?"

Varian remembered his own lungs. "I..."

Then, in the span of six seconds (exactly), Hugo watched clear as day as reality washed over his roommate. "Oh, wow, I said 'love' didn't I?"

Love. "You did." *Love.*

"Oh," Varian took a small step back. "I said 'love'."

"You did." Hugo repeated, frustration lacing his tone, a preferable choice to let that slip than the burning hot embarrassment bubbling under his skin.

"I shouldn't have said it like that." Varian covered his face. Hugo could imagine how much worse his roommate was feeling.

Love. "Oh, you think so?" he shot back, sounding furious. Cause seriously *what in the world was that confession?* Hugo had half a mind to assume this was some kind of joke, or that he'd just

imagined the whole encounter.

“Oh my goodness.” Varian muffled into his hands. “I *really* shouldn’t have said that.”

His roommate’s plain-as-day mortification dashed any hypothesis of hallucinations. The joke-theory was on the table though. “But you did.”

“Oh my *Oz*. ”

Hugo gutted out a breathless laugh, sudden and clawing its way up his windpipe. “You love me?”

Varian groaned into his hands.

“You *love* me?!?”

Face still hidden, Varian promptly walked (ran) blind to his own desk, where his glove sat collecting dusk, taking a split second for each hand to put them on, before slamming them back to his face.

“Are you *kidding* me?!?”

“Okay, I get it!”

“Do you?” Hugo laughed. “You sure didn’t get it a minute ago! Someone who *gets* it would not storm in like there’s a fire under his ass—”

“I did not ‘storm’ in!” Varian yelped, hands moving to his hair, his freckles lost in a sea of reddish-tan.

“Yes, you did! Ruddiger ran under your bed and everything!”

On the contrary, Olivia certainly wasn’t startled. Calm on his desk, she nudged past Hugo’s hand, making herself comfortable atop the decoded notes.

At the mention of his friend-pet, Varian vaulted to said bed, checking underneath, coaxing the raccoon out, muttering. “Explosions and alchemical reactions don’t make you blink, but a door does?”

“The trash rat is *not* the one who needs criticizing right now, Goggles.”

Speaking of, once Ruddiger settled atop the bed, Varian wasted no more time finding his nicknamesake goggles, hanging off his bedpost. “There’s no need for any critique!” He said, almost violently pulling his hair over the straps, adjusting so quickly some strains stuck up in odd places. “Obviously, I shouldn’t have said it!”

Damn right. Hugo nearly said. Obviously, Varian cared about him, wanted him around. But *love* him?

Love.

It was a joke. It had to be. The bursting in, the lack of follow-through, the complete unpreparedness, the whole thing was utterly mean. A mean joke. Uncharacteristically so. *Drop it*

and move on, he thought, decided, demanded of himself. But Hugo was gluttoned for misery, it seemed. Why else would Hugo have dared to ask, “Then why did you say it?!”

“Because I meant it!” Varian’s voice shook, cracked, unmistakably, undercutting him spectacularly.

“What?” Hugo said for the second time.

To his credit, though his discomfort was obvious, Varian did not shrink, or run, or rush to correct himself (or double down). The question stayed there, alongside the ever-present unsure atmosphere, for longer than Hugo would’ve thought wise. *What’s the hold up? Take it back. Please, take it back.* Then, using the softest tone Hugo ever heard, he repeated. “Because I meant it.”

Oh. *This isn’t a joke.* Of course, it wasn’t a joke. Why did he ever think otherwise? This was *Varian*. Why was it so easy to forget how *good* his roommate could be?

Then, the floodgates really opened. Embarrassment, shame, yearning, disbelief; Hugo’s face warmed with a truly colorful combination of all that and more, creeping down up his ears and down his neck (adding a healthy dose of fear to the mix, since his pale complexion wouldn’t hide it in the slightest). Yet, he could not give voice to any of it. Instead, he returned to a single word:

“Why?”

Varian’s shock was plain as an open book. Hugo half-expected him to start stumbling over his words, acting all furious and flustered all over again. But, that didn’t happen. Shock was replaced by a distinct but gentle comprehension. All the while, the aspiring alchemist hadn’t moved from the spot he’d stepped back to; both too far and too close (Hugo couldn’t decide which was worse).

Then, at last, Varian’s expression grew determined, knowing where to start. “Remember that night in the cooking class-ic classroom? Before Legacy Day?” Still, his gloved hands fidgeted with themselves, and his gaze remained elsewhere. “We sat around, talking, eating shitty scrambled eggs, and even though we were both sleep deprived and I’d been such a jerk to you—”

“I was worse.” *I am worse.* The thought sank Hugo faster into the abyss.

Though Varian appeared ready to argue the semantics of that sleepless, dreadful night, he relented. “We spent way too long being jerks to each other.”

Though he didn’t interrupt, Hugo couldn’t agree more.

“But that’s my point,” With each word, he sounded more sure of what to say, each syllable easier to get out. “It took *me* way too long to acknowledge how I liked being around you,” his voice fell off, caught between a laugh and a wince. “If I can draw out a scientific metaphor,” Hugo nearly rolled his eyes. Nearly. “I’ve finally examined not just the components, but the results. Took me long enough, but now that I’m here...”

By that point, Hugo was already barely listening. All of this explanation barely made a dent in his mind, itself swirling around that one word. That far too real word. Like wading through rapid waters. A deer in headlights. A head on collision on what should be a one-way road.

Love.

To love Varian was one thing.

As per his own realization barely half an hour ago, Hugo knew he felt the same. Put simply, he wanted Varian in his life. Hugo could handle that want. He *was* handling it.

But to *be* loved? By *Varian*? That was something else entirely. It didn't exist in a vacuum, and that hurt (to put it lightly). Somehow, Varian managed to top the power of that word with a phrase much more cutting to Hugo.

"I see you." Then, perhaps because not doing so would undercut his point, Varian steered his eyes back up, meeting Hugo's. "I see you clear as day, and what I see isn't half bad."

No, Hugo thought. *No, you don't. You don't see me. You don't know...*

From where he stood by the desk, Hugo's hand still lingered on the penultimate pages of decoded notes, the ones he'd felt the need to check to make sure everything Varian showed him was true. He had doubts that needed satisfying.

Why did he do it?

Hugo was always primed for let downs. Always waiting for the other shoe to drop. He was a loose collection of hopes and plans, shaped like a person, never anything real to grab onto. A sad joke, then, to find that the one person who wouldn't let him down was the one person he betrayed.

Why did he do it?

They were friends at the time, weren't they? Fresh and new, perhaps, but they were friends. Hearts made bare to each other before Legacy Day. So, why betray his confidence?

Well, he hadn't been very eager to do so.

Donella told him pointblank that the Storybook was an all-or-nothing deal. Everyone sticks to their destiny, or it's destroyed and no one has a destiny. How exactly it's destroyed, he still didn't know. Neither did Varian. Maybe Don did; she hadn't said. All that mattered at that time, and as the year dragged on from the hearsay of autumn into the honesty of winter, was that Varian's plans had no happy ending. He would either accept his destiny, or attempt to rid the world of the Storybook. If he tried the latter, he would fail. She would anticipate the attempt. She would— *will* stop him, because she knew he'd have the know-how needed to try. Maybe if she didn't know he had the notes, she'd be caught off guard.

She knew because Hugo told her.

Why did he do it?

A plain answer: Hugo had doubts. Right from the start, he doubted Ulla's findings would let both him and his roommate get what they wanted. To some extent, he doubted his roommate would truly account for both their wants, even if there was a way.

Donella's goal was to find out what was wrong with the Storybook; to protect her destiny. By extension, she would protect Hugo's. So, if telling her about Ulla's notes helped, of course, he would do it.

But she already knew. She collected her sources for goodness sake! So, when she told him his doubts were sound, that it was all-or-nothing, that she would stop Varian if he tried to destroy the

Storybook... Well, she was going to do it anyway! Why not make sure his own destiny was secure in the process? Why not lend a hand? He gained nothing from helping Varian destroy his ticket to security. If it was all inevitable, why not help her?

And help her he did, again and again.

One final time: why did he do it?

Simply because Hugo wanted to be the Sorcerer's Apprentice. More than anything. More than he wanted to help his roommate. Betraying Varian was the path of least resistance.

"I could be myself with you," Varian explained further, desperate to be heard, the lack of response no doubt agonizing. "and it makes me so ridiculously happy that you can be yourself around me too — I've still got a million questions about that glove you invented, *invented* — and how you always have my back and trust me to have yours, so *trust* me, when I tell you," Varian sighed, his face beet red, eyes shining. "I love you."

All at once, Hugo felt the weight of his many, *many* faults and mistakes, regrets and transgressions, the shape of his lies, deceit, and conspiracy against the one person who'd ever told him he *loved* him. Looking at the whole picture, it wasn't unreasonable to reason he'd manipulated his roommate into admiring a heart that didn't exist.

It made him feel gross.

"So," Varian was clearly trying, and failing, not to sound desperate to know. He was losing hope. "You got an opinion about all that?"

It was less an opinion, more a cold law of nature, centering him, blinding and blistering.

I don't deserve you.

Did he have to say it? The thought alone had his ears ringing.

No, wait, that ringing was real.

"Shit," Varian scrambled to find his mirrorphone. "I didn't text the shits back. I bet it's Eugene... Yep. Shit—"

The noise doubled as Hugo's own mirrorphone rang a moment later. The very same one he couldn't find during the blackout, having assumed in his panic that it was magic-ed away with his jacket, unreachable beneath the future fairy godmother's magic.

Wait, I still have that? Yes, he did. Now, calmer (debatable), and in a quiet enough environment to actually hear it, he followed the sound, patting down his skirt to find a stealthily hidden dress-pocket under the feathery ruffles. *Of course. Of-fucking-course.* Ignoring that cherry on this shit sundae, he moved to retrieve the device, intending to silence it. *Is that the others calling?* He wondered. *Why call both of us? Do they think I'm not with Varian—*

It wasn't Eugene.

"My mother's calling."

Why?

Why now, after all this time?

Why now, of all times?

Why?!

For the first time, being reached out to by his successor did not bring Hugo relief. Quite the opposite. He wanted an out from this conversation, but—

“You should answer,” his roommate’s voice echoed. He was already at the door. “The others are waiting for me. We can talk later, or not, totally up to you.”

He’s trying to escape a rejection. Panic washed over Hugo, and despite his second-nature of schooling his reactions, he knew it must’ve been plain on his face. His silence had told a story all on its own. *He’s assuming I don’t feel the same.*

“Varian...” he started, unable to collect his thoughts.

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s—”

“Really, it’s okay,” his roommate’s voice overlapped with the opening door.

Breathless, Hugo laid bare the one truth he could admit. “I’m sorry.”

If the conversation ended there, if that was the last word, it’d be a mercy Hugo didn’t deserve. Maybe that was why, with his grasp on the handle, his roommate turned back, his complexion flushed and strained, and delivered the killing-blow with a smile. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry for.”

If only.

The door shut. Outside in the hall, soft steps disappeared quickly.

Hugo wasn’t sure how long he stood there after Varian left. All he knew was at one point, midnight passed. When it did, it came with a shimmering blue *poof* of magic. Farrah’s oh-so generous spell had ended. As it dissipated, so too did his True Hearts Day attire, replaced with the semi-casual chosen attire he’d donned before the dance. That was enough to shock him out of his static state. He realized he couldn’t feel his legs, soon leaving him slumped on the floor.

All of this was easier at the dance, in the midst of music and light, to think ‘*Everything might be alright.*’ While that was true, everything *might* be alright, Donella *might* be wrong, a future existed in which Hugo’s two-faced spying wasn’t as bad as it could’ve been, it was also just as true that that wouldn’t be the case. Furthermore, in the dimness of their dorm, another thought was simple and plain: *Would the outcome make a difference?*

Shutting down the thought was difficult, but necessary, for it was a step too far into despair. Hugo had to believe it made a difference. That was his only lifeline now, his single path forward, believing if he’d done wrong either way, at least the outcome might reap less dire consequences for Varian.

His mirrorphone rang again, this time on his desk, where he'd set it down without thinking when his roommate fled. Ignoring messages seemed to be a running gag that night.

When he glanced at the desktop, eye-level with his floor-sat self. There, Olivia hadn't left her perch atop the two pages of decoded notes, her little head frozen at a downward angle. She was stone-calm. Scarily so.

"Tired, Liv?"

She ignored him.

"Olivia?"

He reached out, hand in her line of sight. A slight but visible tremor ran through her, then she jumped into his hand, curling into herself like he was the best of all non-mechanical creatures. This conjured a smile from Hugo, though it vanished as his eyes returned to the other, less sentient, device.

Obviously, he'd let Don's call go unanswered. Two follow-up texts (she never left voicemails; far too cautious to let anyone overhear), burned into the screen.

Office. Five minutes.

That one arrived six minutes ago. As for the most recent text, only thirty seconds old, it was similarly curt.

Get moving.

Muscle memory drove Hugo from there. That and a healthy dose of self loathing. Even coupled with the understanding that he couldn't, *wouldn't* undercut Varian any further, that he shouldn't have in the first place, he didn't know what else to do. All he knew as Donella had been wrong, might be wrong again, and that was only going to change her plans if she knew that possibility existed.

Thus, with a grace he didn't expect to possess (at least, not right then), Hugo grabbed his bag (the weight letting him know his metal glove was in there, as Maddie assured it would be), and headed out, slowing only a tad when he heard a scurrying behind him. Olivia caught up quickly, climbing up his leg and into the bag. He didn't have the strength to slow down.

It was time to have a talk with his predecessor; his mother; Don. Who knows what he'd say to her, but it must be the right place to start doing the right thing. Right?

Oh no, Hugo's stride faltered. *How am I going to tell her about my bookmark?* Would doing so be a betrayal too? She needed to know that part, at the very least.

Right?

The halls of the school were supposed to be empty. Anyone who attended the dance (who wasn't there helping clean up, hanging out, etc, etc), was already back in their rooms. It was this dark and empty terrain that Hugo expected to find. That's what he got, until he neared the teacher's office hallway.

There, he found not students, but lackeys. Hugo recognized them, vaguely. Just out of sight, he watched as one after the other they walked past, quiet and forgettable (as Don expect everyone to be), carrying cardboard boxes, crates, storage trunks and small spell-bound trinkets (with protective gloves on). He recognized the path they took, remembered how it led to one of the school's many smaller side-entrances.

What's going on?

An opening made itself known and Hugo continued on his path. When he reached the door, he allowed himself an unprecedentedly long breath in, then out. In, then out. Too long, it seemed. In no time at all, a lackey (hands empty now) appeared behind him, letting out a small cough. He was blocking their path.

Opening the door, that lackey brushed past like he wasn't there, grabbing what little was left in the room that could be carried, and heading out again.

"You're late."

Given how long it'd been since she'd said *anything* to her successor, her choice of greeting could've been better. So could his.

"Nice to see you too, Mother Dearest."

Trying not to notice the daggers she sent his way, Hugo took in his surroundings. What little decor Donella previously had in her school-office (useful things, supplies, nothing frivolous) had disappeared, no doubt carted away by the lackeys he'd encountered. All that remained was the bare bones furniture the administration had provided: a desk, a desk-chair, and curtains for the window (half-drawn closed). Only one item of worth was still in the room. On Don's desk, practically buzzing with pure magic, sat the Storybook of Legends. It was open, and Don, staring down at it, held a white feather pen hung from her fingertips.

Jarring didn't begin to describe it. Hugo didn't know the Storybook could be forced open. He'd seen Don study the book several times, but in all those instances she'd been focused on the Storybook's "essence," its pure magic. She could beckon it without opening the Storybook itself. Did she need a key—

"The key-summons they make students do at Legacy Day isn't really necessary," Don explained as she flipped between pages. Hugo hadn't realized his curiosity was that obvious. That, or Don knew him well enough to know what he was thinking. He hoped this was a case of the former, not the latter. "The keys simply allow the Storybook to flip to the right page, the right story, for the signee."

"How—"

"Ulla, once upon a time, in passing," Don's voice got quiet, "she did that often; rambled about the details of her research when I contacted her."

So she spoke of it, but it wasn't important enough to add to the notes? Hugo wondered. It did beg the question of other "details" Ulla might've left out of her notes. He'd never considered that before. "Still," he pressed on. "Is it safe to have it open like that?" Fresh, fearful words floated through his mind. *Wrong person. Potential disappearance. Death.*

“Good question.” Don offered, as Hugo tried not to look affected, unsure whether to take the comment as a compliment or insult. “Another detail Ulla offered me: The Storybook is all fine and dandy being open, as long as it isn’t feeling rejected.”

Now *that* freaked him. The phrase “feeling rejected” was so close to the topic of bookmarks, he couldn’t help but reconsider his early self-reassurances. *Does she already know?* If she did, then his theory that she was wrong about Ulla’s final findings was moot. More importantly, more likely than not, it would mean she *knowingly* put him at risk. But why would she—

“Though,” Don added, “the circumstances necessary for such a thing are beyond my knowledge.”

Hugo relaxed. *Of course she doesn’t know.*

Perhaps someone signing, who’s meant to sign, shutting the Storybook without signing. A decent hypothesis, but not much more. *Right person, wrong reaction?* Healthy skepticism followed. *That can’t be right. On Legacy Day, Raven—*

She closed the Storybook. Nothing happened.

“Exactly how it was on Legacy Day.” *Minus the multiple-mirror shatterings*, which Hugo could assume were more a consequence of Raven’s powers than the Storybook itself. Despite this expected and safe outcome, Don frowned, the lines of her face deepening more than usually. “How disappointing. Really, I expected the *genuine* Storybook of Legends,” her voice dripped with sarcasm, “to be more secure than this.” She then reopened the Storybook without difficulty, flipping through in search of something specific.

Ignoring her strange bitterness, Hugo stepped closer, watching as she stopped at a particular page: A signing page with an empty dotted line. Sure enough, a white feather pen re-appeared above. Don took it. Then, she tapped the feather to the page once, then twice, right on the line.

Wrong person.

“What was with the movers?” Hugo tried suddenly, desperately, to distract her. *Potential disappearance. Death.* “Sick of this place already?”

Her gaze was slightly shaky, but it wasn’t directed at him. The feather in her hand was all but stabbed the page. “Wait outside. I don’t need to hear you jabbering as I conduct this test—”

“What test?”

Donella stopped tapping the feather, instead leaving its point pressed to the page. For some reason, one he didn’t have the brainpower to ponder, that time, she gave him an answer. “I’m going to see what happens if someone who’s *signed* the Storybook tries to write their name in this one a second time.”

Wrong person. Fresh and horrifying. The words wouldn’t stop. *Potential disappearance. Death.* Then, on the unsigned line she began to write, cursive and recognizable, the beginnings of a name. *Her name.*

“Don’t!”

Summoning a gust of wind, Hugo flung the feather out of her hand, sending it flying. The sheer force of the wind also snapped the Storybook shut, dissipating the feather. Then, a shiver down his spine. Too much force, power, *magic* for his bookmark's liking. The wind began to pick up. Began, and nothing more, as Donella shot the growing storm away with a snap of her wrist.

Those cold eyes were already back on him. "Start talking," she bit out. "Now."

Hugo swallowed some invisible bile in his throat, adrenaline racing through him. There was no time to think, no time to guilt. He wasn't going to stand by and let her disappear.

"I have a bookmark."

He spilled it all. Point-by-point, in a daze. When he finished, a long silence stretched between them. The kind of silence that does not end after it's broken. It lives on in one's ears, forever, a frozen purgatory.

"Well, that's news to me," Donella said.

She said it because it was true. *Of course it's true. Of course she didn't know.* Hugo thought, sounding out each syllable internally, point by point, letter by letter. He told himself it made sense because it did. It made sense. Not getting his bookmark till now was his own fault. His doubts alone held him back. That was the only explanation. Donella couldn't have believed Ulla's findings about bookmarks. She didn't know about them! If she had, she would've said something, raised an alarm, made certain her successor had one in preparation for Legacy Day. It made sense that she didn't know. It made sense. It made sense. It made sense. It. Made. Sense.

So, why was Hugo's bullshit meter still blaring?

"I knew disappearing was possible if someone who'd already signed tried to sign again," Don continued, "Ulla told me herself. However, she failed to mention that others fell under that umbrella. This was very soon before she reached her ultimate conclusions about the Storybook. Tunnel-vision wasn't uncommon with her, especially when stressed. I'm certain she forgot to tell me everything considered less-important in her mind, unfortunately including the full extent of bookmarks, and the dangers of "wrong" signees."

That also made sense. As an added bonus, it calmed his nerves a modicum. It simply slipped through the cracks. That's all! What little Don did know obviously led to this test— *Wait.* "If you knew you were putting yourself in harm's way," he collected himself, "why were you about to write ___"

Pen to paper, ink to page, feather moving along the line, and suddenly Donella had written her name on the page.

The Storybook's buzzing turned to humming. From there. Hugo expected flames. He expected flashes of light, thunder, awe and horror and nothing in its wake. He expected something of that sort. He expected, in that brief window of time when he hadn't fully processed the action he'd just witnessed, to lose his mother.

Nothing of that kind happened. In fact, nothing happened at all. Like a faulty experiment, the Storybook simply fizzled out.

Donella stood slowly, closed the Storybook carelessly.

Hugo vaguely recollected that Donella asked him to follow her. That was the last thing she said in that office. In a daze, he followed her down hallways, around corners, through the dark and familiar school he'd grown to call home, then finally out one of said school's many side entrances. Maybe that was real, maybe it wasn't. Either way, next thing he knew he was outside, by the side of the school, at Don's side, two cars waiting for them.

With how late at night this was and the placement of the car (not out front, but parked at a small, side entrance, looping by a dirt road that led back to the front), it was likely no one had seen them arrive, or would see them leave.

The first car was where all the boxes went, both in the truck and the back seats (he could see them through the windows), wherever anything would fit. The other was empty alone. A lackey Hugo didn't recognize stood by the storage-filled car. He handed Don a pair of keys, then disappeared into the crowded car, driving away.

"Ulla was wrong," Hugo managed, at last, to say. As if anything else could be said. As if anything else mattered.

"How painless this would be, if that were the case," Donella sighed, her words immediate and precise. "But I highly doubt it."

So, I do have a bookmark? Hugo questioned— then concluded. *I must.* His relief, though powerful, left him with one crude sentiment: *So, what the hell is going on?!*

Then, in one stride, she stepped into his space, taking hold of his upper arm. With a mighty pull, she began dragging him toward the car. "Hey!" That knocked him from his stupor. "Wait, wait! Where—?"

"Home."

"Now?!" With a bluntness he so often avoided, Hugo scrambled for a reason to stay. "I need to go back to my dorm. Get my things."

"You have enough essentials at the manor."

"I don't have Olivia with me."

"Yes, you do," she stated, almost insulted. "You always do."

Hugo blinked. Since when had she ever given Olivia a glance? Speaking of, the robotic mouse hadn't stirred from his bag, still nestled in there with his metal glove (which he'd still like to show Don, under better circumstances). She seemed determined to hide there.

"I have a schedule to keep," Don took another step, her hand iron on his arm.

Then, brave and blundering, Hugo spoke without thinking. "Then include telling me what's going on in your itinerary."

A falter, a pause. Nails dug into the fabric of his sleeve so tightly, Hugo thought they'd pierce the threads. *Now's the part where I shut up*, as he'd done many times before. As he always had to.

Good thing he didn't have to anymore. Right?

Of the dozen questions the Sorcerer's Apprentice had rattling around his head — "*Why didn't the Storybook react like it should've?*" "*Did you figure out what was wrong with it?*" "*Why leave tonight?*" "*Why the urgency?*" "*Why tonight, of all nights?*" "*Why, after so long, are you talking to me again?*" "*And, to reiterate, what the hell is going on?!*" — being a few, the first one to grace the air was a simple one:

"Why do you need me to come home?"

For as long as he'd been at this school (though it wasn't long in the grand scheme), he'd been heldover in the dorms during official breaks. The only times she brought him home were when she had a job for him. But his job was here, wasn't it? With Ulla's notes? Even if Don thought she knew what the last page would say, what could be more important than that?

The Storybook. That godawful test. "*But I highly doubt it.*"

Don glowering. She wasn't going to answer that one.

But she'd raised a smart young man, too smart for his own good.

"That was the last test you needed to perform, wasn't it? Why else would you be leaving?" Hugo said, only growing more sure as he spoke. "You know what's wrong with the Storybook now, don't you?" He wasn't nearly as afraid as he felt he might've been otherwise. "So, what is it?" *I may need to know this.* "What's wrong with the Storybook?" *Varian may need to know this too.*

Donella let no outward emotion slip.

"Get in the car, and I'll tell you."

"That's not how this works," Hugo wasn't processing the words leaving his mouth. It was like he was clearing phlegm from his throat; a necessary, desperate task. Clearing the air of the conditions that led to his betrayal of his roommate. The willingness to not push back, not ask questions. "Not anymore."

Because Donella was *wrong* about bookmarks. She couldn't hold his destiny over his head anymore. He was her Apprentice; unsigned but as close to secure as he'd ever been. It was too late to swap him out now. There was safety in that knowledge, allowing him to act in ways he never fathomed he would act. Such as: standing up to her. So, Hugo wagered his words like a threat, and held true to it.

Then, Don made a face.

The Sorcerer was not an expressive person; not in Hugo's experience anyhow. Sure, she had reactions, little facial cues, but nothing truly telling. He'd always imagined (as a sort of inside joke made only to himself) that if he ever did see a big display from her, in some far off unthinkable scenario, it would *still* be indecipherable. Unknowable even when her guard slips. That was how he imagined it going. But that was theoretical. This was actual, and that wasn't what actually happened; it was the opposite. In an instant, Hugo knew precisely what that look conveyed: *Deja vu.*

“I see,” she breathed out. Whatever conclusion she came to, it was shattering and undeniable; enough to spur something *real* from her.

Now listen, True Hearts Day was a very long day, full of running around, panic, guilt, dread, despair, hope, love and outright horror all so palpable he wouldn’t be surprised to find their intensity alone had formed bruises. Save for one other realization, this simple response put the entire day to shame.

“The Storybook is fake.”

Four words to put the world on a new axis.

“At least, the one the school currently possesses is a fake,” she continued. “It is a masterful forgery, imbued with magic beyond even *my* capabilities. I’m certain whoever made the fake also took the real...” she kept talking, but by then Hugo had all but stopped listening, too overcome by the sweetest of understandings.

Varian didn’t actually sign the Storybook.

The delight in that thought dizzied him. It matched the same tune as those moments at the dance had, realizing Varian might have more of a chance at happiness, that the Storybook might not be all or—

A sharp tone brought him back to reality. “Wherever the real one is— and make no mistake there *is* a real Storybook of Legends— we need to find it.”

She would go about this mission with or without him.

“What if we can’t find it?” Hugo asked.

If that happened... Two outcomes appeared clear. The first, a future where Varian would never be forced to sign the Storybook. How could he be, if there was no Storybook to sign?! Hugo could picture that one. It sat snugly in his heart.

But on the other hand, if they didn’t find the Storybook, that’d also create the second, simultaneous outcome: Hugo wouldn’t sign the Storybook either.

What will become of me then?

“We have to find it,” near imperceptibly, Don’s voice cracked. Hugo never heard it done before. At least, not in that way. In near-anguish. For her, this was life or death. “Who knows when the Storybook was replaced? We’re talking about potential *years* of unsigned successors,” her voice quieted. “Ask yourself this, apprentice of mine: If the wrong person signing the *real* Storybook results in their disappearance, as I’m sure it does, what might happen if the right people don’t sign at all?”

Potential disappearance. Replacing a strange, morbid hopefulness, urgency consumed Hugo. *Death.* “I don’t wanna know.”

“And I don’t want to find out.”

There was no other option. The Storybook had to be found.

Donella's hand (truly, *truly*, he'd all but forgotten it was on his arm in the first place) slipped off him. The absence was a welcome one, but the residual ache conjured mental images of broken skin. He resisted the urge to check the damage, most likely only bruised.

The reprieve didn't last long.

Though she let go, Donella stood very, *very* close, eyes boring into him. "Well, if you're done demanding answers to pointless questions— questions I've *already* figured out the answers to— questions you wouldn't need to ask if you trusted that I know what I'm doing..." As the impulse to step back took shape (with the subtlety of a blaring alarm), Hugo was reminded exactly how frightening his guardian could be, when she wanted to be. "Then, get in the fucking car."

Sobering and necessary, Hugo was suddenly overcome with overwhelming clarity. The whole day shifted from the present into the past, leaving him only with the day's collection of fear, relief and hope. These lighthouses guided him back to the only objection he could stomach: Helping his roommate, really helping him this time. As much as he possibly could. As much as was possible at all.

In the meantime, Goggles could finish the notes without him. Knowing him, they'd be done by the end of winter break week, if not by the first day. With any luck, they would reveal Don was wrong again. As for himself, Hugo needed to assist Don, and find the Storybook.

With all that said, she didn't have to pull very hard to get Hugo into the car.

Long ago, back when he was very young and very amazed to have a destiny dangled above him, Hugo had asked Cyrus why Donella always drove herself around when she clearly had enough employees to do the job. His answer: "*She'd rather not leave any chance of unnecessary conversation in enclosed spaces.*"

"*Then, why not drive with you?*" Little Hugo had quipped. "*You don't talk about shit.*"

"*I'm talking now, aren't I?*"

For context: this answer came after Hugo asked, at minimum, a dozen times over with no reply.

Hugo remembered that. He remembered everything (even semi-)personal that he'd learned about Don. Granted, the grand sum of that information was microscopic, but the point stood.

So, when Donella did not speak as they drove to the Sorcerer's Manor, supposedly the same great estate the Sorcerer housed in the original story (however long ago that truly was; centuries at minimum), Hugo wasn't surprised. In fact, he matched her energy. It wasn't a difficult task at first. Indeed, coming down from the highs and lows of everything he'd learned that day, Hugo's energy levels were abysmally low.

Yet, some questions lingered, and as he rested in the reprieve, they simmered until they became too loud for his impressive willpower to ignore.

"I thought you were going to forsake me as your successor," Hugo started. "I thought you'd already decided to do so."

Donella said nothing for a very long time. It got to the point where Hugo thought he'd imagined letting the words escape his throat.

"It would've been very easy to lie to you," she began, posture straight, focus on the road. "Back there, when the Storybook—the fake, but you didn't know that at the time—didn't react how she said it would. I could've let you think Ulla was wrong—could've let you think the book didn't throw you a bookmark, that it didn't see you as..." she swallowed, "as my successor. I could've let you think I wasn't wrong."

It was only then that he noted the exhaustion in her voice. Exhaustion, and something else he couldn't name. Impatience, perhaps, but that didn't seem right. Was it honesty? He'd already heard that from her. Informational and true. This was that, and something else on top of it.

"But you didn't."

"But I didn't," Donella echoed. Or was he the one echoing her? She'd all but set that conclusion up for him.

She still hadn't answered his initial question.

"You've had the option to drop me for years now. Did you decide to use it?" Hugo didn't give her a chance to answer. He couldn't. "Not that you'd actually been able to. Too little, too late. Such a shame." Hugo tried to sound like his unbothered self. Where had that young man gone? "Guess that hasn't been an option for a while, what with my bookmark—"

"Well, I didn't know that until tonight. Nevermind knowing having a bookmark makes you virtually untouchable," she insisted, like it was insulting and obvious to say.

Hugo hummed in acknowledgement.

"But you want to know what I would've done," Donella spat out.

Hugo hummed again, and the floodgates opened.

"Flattery doesn't make good Sorcerers, Hugo."

Great start, he thought, sinking further into his seat.

"But apparently, it makes *all* Sorcerers," Donella scoffed. "What a load of shit. If all it requires is being seen as the successor by you and your predecessor—well frankly, it disgusts me that you didn't develop a bookmark sooner."

So am I.

"Well, I didn't change my tune," Don adjusted the rear mirror, "and only now do you have a bookmark."

Hugo knew the purpose of her words. Sidelining any debate on who's fault this was. His, not hers. He got the message. *I should've been better.*

But that wasn't enough. "I never thought you needed honeyed words to believe simple things. That's quite the unexpected, ugly personality flaw." She had to twist the knife. "How disappointing

it is, to know I was wrong.” Being hit with some awful, agonizing spell would’ve been preferable to this current form of torment.

I shouldn’t have asked— shouldn’t have listened to the answer.

The rest of the drive was silent, and they pulled into the manor not long after. Once parked, Donella didn’t move for a very long time. Hugo didn’t move either, watching and waiting for her. He could practically hear the gears turning as her gaze pierced him for the first time in hours.

I need to get out of this car.

Then, Donella did something Hugo never, not in a hundred years, imagined she would do.

She hugged him.

It was an awkward hold. If the desired outcome was comfort or warmth, it did neither. “To say the least, I’m glad you’ve overcome that flaw.” But her words did, in their very Donella Cast-way. “You are my successor. There has never been another option. You were always going to sign that Storybook.” At last, she let go of him. “So, no, I was never going to forsake you.”

She’s lying.

That was his very first coherent thought. Despite it, Hugo chose to believe her. It was easier to believe her.

But when had his life ever been easy?

It hadn’t. He should know. He remembered every detail. In particular, he remembered Don.

A memory burst through his skull. It was right when she’d stopped that out of control storm/cyclone spell, the day Hugo’s curse— his *bookmark* appeared. The mental image he retained of Donella’s face that day was clear as crystal (though, he hadn’t given it any thought, too terrified and confused in his own right to *think* at all in that moment). Wide-eyed bewilderment. A perfectly reasonable reaction from someone who didn’t understand what was happening at the time. There was also fury, silent fury, in her expression. Again, perfectly reasonable. It was almost too perfect a reaction, wasn’t it? Subdued by most people’s standards, but for Don?

Then, in her office, she’d acted more akin to an animal backed into a corner. He remembered that just as vividly. But that wasn’t the behavior of someone scared for someone else. An animal in a corner doesn’t fear for another animal’s sake! It fears for itself, understanding in precise detail the danger it finds itself in, not someone else. That wasn’t the demeanor of someone who was scared for their son. That was the demeanor of someone scrambling to hold together something that had spiraled out of control...

Donella knew about the true nature of bookmarks before tonight. She was lying, saying she didn’t know. At least, that was the theory his mind supplied.

Normally Hugo would call this train of thought *intuition*, that little sixth sense he’d developed over the years to warn him away from imminent danger. But this train? It was a stretch, even by his over-cautious standards. The whole idea didn’t make any sense! If she knew he wasn’t ready, that he needed and didn’t have a bookmark, why would she let him try to sign? What was there to gain? Yes, this was a very unproductive train of thought. Paranoid beyond validity.

Yet, the notion wouldn't leave him alone.

Best not to dwell on it. Paranoia helped him none, and goodness he'd need all the help he could get. There was only one path forward to the future Hugo wanted, and what a precarious path it was.

Only if they found the Storybook could it be depowered. Only if Varian completely decoded Ulla's notes would they know how to do that. Only if the notes revealed Don was wrong about the Storybook being all-or-nothing could they depower it without sacrificing Royal wants with Rebel desires. Only if that happened could Varian refuse his destiny and Hugo finally have his own. Only if that happened could Hugo have Don and Varian's trust, with neither canceling each other out, contradicting the other, or dictating the other must be betrayed. Only if all the pieces fell where they should could Hugo, when the time came, explain everything to Varian. Only if all this came to pass would Hugo be forgivable.

Only if... then Hugo could reciprocate, emphatically, Varian's feelings, knowing this time he'd deserve that affection.

All of that could happen, only if Hugo got the fuck out of this car.

It wasn't until they were through the doors of the manor that Hugo became aware of an absence. One he should've noticed sooner.

"So, what's going on with Cyrus?"

In a blink, the exhaustion in Don's gray eyes was gone. "Did he contact you?"

"No," Hugo paused, surprised by her note of urgency. "Actually, I'm pretty sure he blocked my number." He laughed, slapping on a self-assured grin. "Rude ass."

If Don found this joke (not a joke) amusing, moving, or anything in between, she didn't say so. "That's for the best."

"Oookay then..." Hugo dared to raise an eyebrow. He could get used to being bold. "Are we doing questions without answers again, or—"

"He doesn't work for me anymore."

"What?!"

Chapter End Notes

Oh hi "I'm Not that Girl" from Wicked :D I've been waiting so many chapters to finally use you in my writing playlist! BUT ALSO HELLO, for those who caught the reference, to "Chant" from Hadestown (whose relevance will carry over to the next chapter).

I've been spoiling y'all with 20k+ chapters (all written for free and for FUN, mind you), but sometimes we don't need all that, and this chapter was a prime example... Anyway the one

after this will be long as fuck. Oops. Cause here's the deal: We are past 200,000 words at this point, and I know where this story is headed. From here on out, we are **MOVING FORWARD** so the plot/pacing may speed up (as much as my personal standards will allow). Hold your hands up and enjoy the roller coaster I have in store.

Hope y'all enjoyed this chapter! I'm eager to see the split between those who watched EAH and those who haven't, as those who did have been **WAITING** for the Storybook reveal. I applaud your patience!

Remember that it's okay to screw up, you need sleep even if it doesn't feel like it, it's fine to be bad at a new job, and please **DRINK SOME WATER!!!!**

End Notes

Hello!! If you want to see more of what I'm posting, consider following my tumblr! Same username as this account! Have a lovely day y'all!!!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!